

# Alexander Gradsky's Rock Opera "The Stadium"

## Some Aspects of Musical Language

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**Abstract**—This article is devoted to the analysis of Alexander Gradsky's rock opera "The Stadium". A well-known singer A. Gradsky, has a bright talent of a composer too. His creations include vocal-instrumental suites and two rock-operas which are not very well studied yet. Such specific moments of music dramaturgy as images, timbre, intonations are considered in this article.

**Keywords**—Alexander Gradsky; "The Stadium"; image; Victor Jara; symbol; music language

### I. INTRODUCTION

Alexander Gradsky composed two rock-operas. They are "The Stadium" with a libretto by Margarita Pushkina (finished in 1985) and "Master and Margarita", based on Mikhail Bulgakov's novel (finished in 2009).

### II. THE IDEA OF THE PLOT

The plot of "The Stadium" is devoted to the historical events in Chile in 1973, but it does not demonstrate real historical details. It focuses on a conflict of the good and the evil, a freedom-loving Singer (Victor Jara) and military junta as a symbol of the evil power. Almost at the same time with "The Stadium" there were created "Orpheus and Eurydice" by Alexander Zhurbin and the "The Star and Death of Joaquin Murieta" by Alexey Rybnikov — the play where the work of Pablo Neruda was comprehended in a direct connection with the events in Chile.

"The Stadium" which was finished later becomes at the same time a direct response to Chile events and a kind of parable, generalization. The personality of a Chilean singer turned into a generalized character but the image of the stadium — the place where sportsmen compete in a fair fight turns into the metaphor of a prison, torture chamber, and fascist regime. The actors of the opera practically don't have names.

The music of "The Stadium" is generalized too — the original melody of Viktor Jara is quoted only once, only the most common rhythmic features of Latin American dance can be found in samba that introduces the first act of the opera." [1]

It should be mentioned that the name of the opera was chosen not accidentally. V. Jara has a poem "The Stadium

Chile" [2] — the place that the Chile junta made a death camp where in 1973 thousands of people were tortured and killed.

### III. MUSICAL LANGUAGE OF THE OPERA

It is characteristic for A. Gradsky's creations but at the same time is quite different from his vocal-symphonic poems. Through-composed dramaturgy, the order of time-limited spaces and in our opinion the double LP format together create dynamic activity and more resolute synthesis of all parameters of the musical action by their symphonization.

The opera begins with an extended introduction written in traditions of symphonic intermezzo, where the spirit, the character and the images of future actions are concentrated. Its first section is not based on Latin American intonations. It is rather a solemn dance in baroque traditions. It seems the music soars over the tragic plot, forming an epic image. The calling ability of string timbre, II "Napolitano" step and ominously vibrating dominant, a roar of timpani — all that can be associated with a fantastic invitation to an execution-fiesta. However, this material plays a more important role — this is like a clot of tension between the Singer and the Power. Though this fragment is short in its unchangeable form, it contains the chorale static that is repeated by the choir later. For a moment the music brings about associations with "Hosanna" from "Jesus Christ Superstar" [3].

In the next part of the introduction the themes of the Singer, Love and the intensively developing minor theme — as the theme of Destiny — are connected. The theme of Destiny has two ways of developing, pastoral and an inferno-aggressive. The theme of Singer transforms twice. It is connected with a new aggressive motive, associated with junta image, and creates an episode of the funeral procession that is heroic and epic in its power. This complex leads to the finale of the introduction — to the triumph of a bright lyrical-epic image.

The final part with arising attacca is considered a central one in its meaning. The distorted timbre of a "dying" motive is predictable — it is the beginning of a tragic opposition. This episode is based on the theme of the Singer. It is developed, it goes beyond octave and it is outlined by the detailed intonation. The theme seems to be broken and

exhausted. However, at some moment its new "face" appears — solemn like an anthem it becomes a symbol. This is a finale of the introduction and then the first scene begins.

The development of the main part of the musical action stands in stark contrast to the introduction. The introduction has a lyric-epical character and contains only a general description of the dramatic conflict but the characters are described quite precisely. It isn't implied in any way that the characters are univocal and sketchy and there is no author's judgment of the events in the opera. Not only the characters, but also social-political ideas are molded into one complex where listeners take active part. (Like in the second scene that presents a dialogue between the opposing characters). It happens because the features of composer's musical

language are connected with elements of revolutionary songs and with rhythmic portrait of the hustle and bustle of the city. Musical descriptions of the characters of the opera are alternated with reading newspaper reports.

This movement is the final part of the exposition of the opera. It consists of an introduction, Singer's monologue and two first scenes. The crowd is divided into freedom-loving men, who echo the Singer and those who are lost in a political intrigue of totalitarian regime. The response of voices can hardly be heard in the density of distorted timbre-rhythm. In addition, the genre solution of one of the fragments of this scene — choir-spiritual — can be associated with the similar scene of "Jesus Christ Superstar" by A. Lloyd-Webber — "What the Buzz"(see "Fig. 1") [3]:



Fig. 1. A. Lloyd-Webber: "Jesus Christ Superstar" — "What The Buzz".

In the next aria of junta there are the references to the sardonic tone of strings of "Hosanna" from "Superstar". One of the composer's techniques in this movement is a stark contrast between the Singer's social realm and his own emotional monologue. In the course of the development, after the apparition of an informer there is an allusion to the Christ's image in the Singer's phrase:

"I am the man, I am a son of a woman, named Mary ... I am the voice of hope that you have crucified at the point of bayonets today." [4] There is an epic messiahship in the Singer's intonation in this scene. He addresses not only to his flock but to the whole world and to eternity. The intervals of vocal part develop in the following way: there is broad coverage of registers, a theatrical smoothness. The emotional

tone of the Singer's part can be found in the intonation of Junta and in the song of the informer. Here it undergoes rhythmic diminution and becomes "disgusting" in its cynicism.

It turns the song of a girl at prison's gates into Ophelia's monologue — the character tells about horrible events of her life with detachment, indifferently as if she is in the otherworld. She appeals to the eternity, to the justice of Heaven too.

Therefore, the Singer's image is like a litmus test, the other people pass through, being judged by the main character of the opera.

The epic intermezzo based on the Singer's intonations sums up the change of the emotional tone of development.

So, the informer's song begins in such an unusual dialogue. But further the gradual small-scale "step-by-step" intonation fills the sound space as if it loses its vector in the main stream.

One of the main movements of "The Stadium" is the Singer's monologue in the finale of the second scene. It consists of two parts — The Dream and The Appeal to God. This aria reminds of the Gethsemane Prayer but unlike the passage from the Bible it has one more prisoner. That is why it is different from a classical interpretation of the Messiah — from the very beginning of the opera he is with his people in the thick of things. He does not try to save anybody and is killed by an executioner's hand.

At the end of the first act the Ballade of the Singer can be heard — this is one of the most beautiful moments of the opera. He bids farewell to his life, appeals to his mother and his wife remembering his peaceful and happy life. Memories cling to memories, forming narrative series of events. Each of them is finished with the words "this was... this was..." that divide the opera into two parts.

The second act starts with two emotionally strong scenes. They are the aria of junta performed when the Singer is ready to go to the execution: "Poets play with passions, inspire the mob to serve. Governments change, poets stay alive. Money doesn't smell of ideas. If poets want to live carelessly, they must indulge lords." [4] The composer combines the narrative positiveness of Singer's intonations with gravelly vocal and an active movement of music. The aria of the Singer gradually turns into a dialogue with junta. The answer of the Singer is clearly heard: "You will not understand why poets dream about happy life when they are put into prison." [4].

The next song of the Swineherd and pigs belongs to the most impressive scenes of the opera. It is an ominous scherzo written in traditions of the evil images in rock operas (For example, King Herod in "Superstar"). The song is characterized by some impressive features. Among them there are changes of a score in climax phrases "Wrong guessed! Wrong guessed!" [4], clicking of a woodblock accompanied by screaming of woodwinds and brass winds. This song is addressed to the Singer, it must show him the right choice. In addition, A. Gradsky uses here a striking

composing technique — he continues to assimilate the opposite intonations — the Singer begins to answer with similarly built phrases. However, further it becomes clear that the enemy's proposal is unacceptable and senseless. Moreover, the Singer says: "I renounce". But this is a kind of anti-renunciation from his former indecision. He does not propose "to turn the other cheek". His words are heard: "I regret very much that I know you little. When I dreamed of victory in summer and you smile to me, I was blind, I did not recognize the enemy." [4] Here the timbre and intonation characteristics form "reverse complexes": the portrait of junta is heard in Singer's words; they become aggressive and lose their epic character, their importance. The melody becomes small-scale in its development. The phrases are no longer linear; they are in an alternative movement.

Music material of Prisoners of the stadium becomes an expressive background for the dialogue of the main characters. The nature of the statement can be compared with the role of a choir in the Ancient Greek tragedy but prisoners' words have an expressive personal character and some questioning intonations that are formed during the whole opera.

At this moment of the development there appears a tragically sad meaning of the events coming from the prisoners' lips: "I wander in a dream out of breath. Everything is destroyed, everything is wrong. Is it possible that people mistake, waste lives on trifles?" [4]

The aria of Lucia (Singer's wife) is an intermezzo of lyrical-epic character. It is not like the other music of this scene despite its similar narrative character. This aria is like a response to horrible events and at the same time a strong desire to meet her husband.

It should be noted that different electronic timbres combinations in "The Stadium" depict a horrible atmosphere. It is not only a musical response to the events of the opera but also an independent actant.

The finale of the first act is very different from the psychological point of view. It consists of Singer's monologue and a duet of the Singer and Lucia. It is their last farewell. Messianic themes are heard here — the Singer says that he must go all the way, deathwards. We hear the Christian sacrificing in his words: "If I waver, who will go? Who will go and face the death? Yes, I am quiet at my last hour" [4]. The Singer talks about his conscious choice, the decision taken many years ago: "Forgive me, my friend, I made up my mind. You will understand me like you have always understood me." If I die, a white bird will cry. Somebody makes my way from the beginning. From the profound of despair, the stone will strike the hope, and silence will cry" [4]. At the same time silent courage and obvious fright are heard in the Singer's words: "Storm is going, and it will kill all living things, they will kill you too... Don't cry. You are a wife of a Singer; you must be strong till the end, then they will kill you" [4].

The children's song about the sleeping sun is the symbol of their farewell. It was the song the Singer and Lucia sang to their children and that is why it sounds "suspended" over

the situation. This song, like Lucia's musical material is based on the Singer's rumba intonations that are heard at the beginning of the opera: "Sly fish dance in the sea. Sparkles of smiles splash in spite of scorching heat..." [4]. These scenes from the space of other intonations, which is common for the main character's life in the world. The intonation character and intervals are opposed to the planarity of "political" scenes. There is no heavy stress, no set course of the phrases — the Singer leaves it with untold pain — his emotions are not taken into account. The last words of the Singer are associated in this scene with the poetic lines of Anna Akhmatova "... where the Mother was silently standing, nobody dared to look" [5].

The last scene representing the execution of Singer and the following events demonstrate the change of the plot intonation. The long intervals disappear; there is no longer any major declamation and epic tone. The main character's musical characterization gets the revolutionary features, an aspiration to victory and eternal life. The rhythm of his monologue is active and rather aggressive, and the words of the main character are fast and laconic: "No! Never! I made up my mind! I hated you for a long time and I will never love you for fear! If I die, a white bird will cry!" [4].

The dialogue of timbre and rhythm makes up a specific feature of A. Gradsky's music. The both parameters play equal role in the opera. Timbre palette combines sound colors of the symphony orchestra that are masterfully created in the sphere of electronic sound which became accessible only in the epoch of rock experiments.

The Singer dies an awful death, and the song about the sleeping sun can be heard at last moments of his life above his executioners shouting "Beat his hands!"

Then the Traitor's words come, he admits his fault ("I am — with executioners! I am — with traitors! I killed the ballade of dreams with my silence. And I'm in it together with dogs.") [4] and feels a wrong release: "There is no Singer, no suffering! Oh, Heavens! He is free" [4]. This episode is finished with fanfare that glorify Singer's exploit.

The next dialogue of Lucia and the Woman is one of the most impressive in the opera. It is written as a duet-overdub. It is full of doom and frustration: "They humiliate people, and kill poets, and machine guns cut grass on arenas. And hold your tongues, they know about it, and we will endure it and bow our heads" [4].

The finale of the opera is full of tragic events and the Singer's experience. The betrayal of the informer is disclosed, the Sergeant who was friendly to the Singer dies. Lucia's image gets epic features. The finale is based on an intensive dialogue of contrast material. It combines the children's song and a contrasting declaration of love to betrayal and an eccentric contrast of Singer's image intonations. The latter penetrates the vertical of the score and forms the finale of the opera where a heroic idea is hymned.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

"The Stadium" is one of lyrical-epic operas of the second half of the 20th century. Such definition explains the active development of lyrical tone in the images of the Singer and Lucia and very fast moving and very organic connection with heroic storyline. Music language of "The Stadium" is really full of pathos despite of the idea of planarity and its representation in the opera. The main factor of forming the musical language is rock music that has a poly-variant character of its expression — ballade, recitative, dance, a long symphonic part.

This art complex and an outstanding music level make "The Stadium" a very bright example of art in the era of cultural globalization.

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