



In-between the Tradition and Modernity: *Dido and Aeneas* from Opera to Dance Opera

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Abstract. It is always a question worthy to be asked that can music be displayed in the form of visual art, or do works that reflect reality have to be criticized? But is it feasible to transform court operas into dance operas? Will people accept this tradition activated by modern technology? Take the original police station in Hong Kong as an example, the Hong Kong government has repeatedly protested because they later transformed the building into a tourist attraction. Many audiences feel that dance opera cannot express the emotions of work as clearly and directly as musicals, but is this the case? Are there any ways to reconcile music and vision? Is proper innovation and creation detrimental to the inheritance of court opera? Many forms of art integrate, and performativity is one of them. It is to integrate exhibition and performance, with actors as artistic installations and exhibition as performance. Nevertheless, there is also constant controversy. This research is going to analyze the conflict between different forms of art.

Keywords: Dido and Aeneas · Traditional Opera · Dance Opera

1 Introduction

Music and visual art are connected, but the difference lies in which one the artists emphasize to present to the audience. As Roger Dean stated, If I am culturally attuned to this situation, I will know that the primary function of all these physical gestures is to make the music sound exactly the way it should [1].

Dido and Aeneas is a very famous English opera from the 17th century, which was created by English composer Henry Purcell. The story roughly tells that Dido and Aeneas were originally in love, but because the Sorceress was dissatisfied with Dido, and the witches did not want Dido to be happy and wanted to take away her lover, they disguised themselves as travel gods and designed a trap to trick Aeneas to leave Dido. Dido mistakenly thought Aeneas was going to betray her, but they did not realize that this was the trick of the bad witches. Faced with Aeneas's retention, Dido just blamed him for breaking his oath. In the end, the two people had no fate. The story ended with the tragic death of Dido [2].

Dido nowadays has been performed in various versions. There will be two different ways of performance analyzed in this essay. The version directed by William Ferrara was released in 2007. The actors performed according to the sequence of plot development with gorgeous clothing, and exquisite and dramatic makeup. The actors who play Dido

in different versions have different performances, such as tough and strong, dramatic, and so on. However, this version of Dido is unique. In my opinion, she deduces the image of Dido that Henry wants to express most vividly: she is a weak woman on the surface, but in fact, she is very obstinate. Tough in heart, but without losing the image of female tenderness.

In traditional ideas, composers express their feelings by creating songs and adding poems. Also, the opera on the stage should consider a series of artistic installations such as drama, dance, costume, stage art, actors, performing art, and so on. Everything is in order. Although some stages are not very gorgeous, they are carried out under the aesthetics of most people. Modern human performance art has always been a controversial art. These sorts of arts usually express the deep thoughts and needs of human beings most directly. However, some people think that performance art is absurd. Mark Morris's work lets this performing art be shown in the form of performance art.

2 Research Objective

The emotional expression of music usually varies from person to person. Just like the saying 'there are a thousand Hamlets in the heart of a thousand readers', listeners will believe in what kind of music it is, even if it is different from the musical emotion the composer wants to express. Visual arts are the same. But it has a little bit of difference between visual arts. Some visual arts allow the audience to feel and understand the atmosphere of the script and the emotions the author wants to express, such as opera. Through the mutual fusion of vision and hearing, the audience is presented with one wonderful artistic space after another [3, 4]. Traditional court operas pay more attention to the singing emotions and expressions of actors. If the focus of music performance is shifted towards the image creation of characters, making music visualize, what difference will it make?

Besides the main task, there are also some Sub-objectives: What are the acting differences between the opera and dance opera of Dido and Aeneas? With a couple of even more difficult questions, this article will also see to the sociology of Dido and the modern image of this traditional figure. Those questions that might remain unanswered are listed below:

There must be a lot of audiences who believe that the transformation of music into dance, the conversion of hearing and vision, sounds very incredible. Morris's work has indeed been under pressure from public opinion. What would be the difference between auditory and visual, and between tradition and recreation?

Is it possible that all traditional court operas can be recreated as dance operas? Should traditional court operas remain in their traditional form or be revitalized with new elements?

Good work takes time. Recreating a work requires much more thought on it. It would be the worth thing that if nowadays artists want to add modern elements to tradition, will it destroy the essence of tradition? Nevertheless, if traditional court operas maintain their traditional form, will they always be accepted by young people? With the continuous development of the times, should tradition be carried forward or protected?

In addition to its musical appreciation value, Dido and Aeneas also reflect practical issues. Whether it is a traditional version of William or a modified version of Morris, it

reflects different social issues. Through the study of Dido's personality, it returns to the previous topic that adding new elements to traditional opera. Is the Morris version of Dido a successful version? What social issues do they reflect?

This study will focus on the comparative analysis between the traditional musical version of Dido and Aeneas directed by William Ferrara in 2007 and the version directed and performed by Mark Morris in 1989. From analyzing the singers' singing emotion, skill, expression, and body language, and from the dancer's dance action, accompaniment, and so on in certain phrases to conclude how to make innovation without changing the original artistic expression in the transition from auditory to visual.

Meanwhile, through appreciation of the plot and analysis of the character's personality, discuss how artists express their emotions through music, and how to achieve deep penetration into the hearts of the audience.

3 Discussion

In William's version, the first act ended with the kiss of Dido and Aeneas, and then the ministers danced happily together. While ministers were laughing and dancing, Dido and Aeneas did not join them. But in Morris's version, Dido and Aeneas are the protagonists of the whole dance, and the ministers are happy to celebrate and feel happy for them. Morris's work set aside all the limitations and perfectly presents the interpretation of love that Henry wanted to express in this opera, making people realize that love does not need to be covered up, and it is human's normal instinct to boldly show their love.

No matter what level of realism is displayed visually, the opera's particular mode of singing reveals it at every moment as ritualized contrivance [5]. At the beginning of the second act, when Sorceress sang the recitative to summon other witches, the pronunciation and articulation were very exaggerated, and the alveolar trill was especially used to show the witches' funny. In addition to the actress's rich expressions and actions, Sorceress in William's version is not a bit dignified but magnifies her arrogance, funny and ridiculous. In Morris's version, the image of the Sorceress is proud, dignified, and full of female charm. He plays both Dido and Sorceress. In the dance opera, there is a dance segment in which Dido lingers with Aeneas before the opening of the third act and after the second act. Nevertheless, Morris did not explain whether the character in this clip is Dido or Sorceress. It looks like Dido on the surface, but when thinking about it thoroughly, it may be Sorceress. In this case, the plot has a subtle psychological change in the dance opera: Sorceress is jealous of Dido because she is in love with Aeneas. But the plot of the whole script has not changed at all.

After all, it is often popularly associated with religious proscription, particularly with the puritanical view that it leads to lascivious, anti-spiritual, carnal behavior [6]. Morris arranges these prejudices against dance in Bach's period into his work. He used this work to tell people that art is free and will never be restricted or limited by anyone's thoughts. He exposed the relationship between sexual relations, encouraging people to face sexuality with a normal attitude, rather than classifying the relationship between the sexes in the operas as lewd with derogatory meaning.

There are melodies and literariness in operas. Assuming that to innovate specific operas, from my point of view, dancers might need to use their bodies to express the

emotions expressed by the melody and lyrics, that is to present the beauty of music and language through the body: how to let the audience understand this dance through music and actors' performance is one of the key points of innovation. In Arthur's (2010) article, Burg said that Debussy did not let the music play a real role, and did not grasp the key of the emotion, as a result, the main source of opera was cut off [7]. Although his focus is on the creation of songs and background music, it is also a reminder of nowadays innovation of opera.

As far as I am concerned, tradition cannot remain unchanged. How to attract the audience's attention without changing the original core of the work is a problem worth considering. It may be a good way to activate the traditional opera by letting the audience know more about what was originally intended to be expressed in a work on the stage that was covered up at that time by watching a work that added modern elements or with changed forms, or combined with the topics of concern in the current society, and then stimulating their desire to make more interest about the traditional version.

Stephanie Jordan pointed out that in the later stages of the work, the ideas of movement about love, sex, and death were all related has been realized, and described in various ways deep vertical lines running through the body [8]. Take Morris's Dido as an example, he expressed his feelings through his social background at that time— during the AIDS epidemic period in his dance. It also magnifies the love expressed in the original work. Furthermore, Dido was in a state of endurance for Aeneas's failure to live up to her. In Morris's version, Dido's helplessness and powerlessness are strongly felt. Trust in a loved one breaks down when Aeneas chooses to listen to other people's nonsense. Devastated, she chose to use her death to express her anger and the true feelings of women that they should not be treated so unfairly. In this new version, Morris not only speaks for women but also expresses the appeal of gender equality. In the face of her lover's departure without reason, in Willian's version, Dido showed helplessness and powerlessness, and her inner indignation was only when she took out her sword and committed suicide.

This is a bit like Lin Daiyu in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, one of the four great classical novels in ancient China, who only reveals her complaints the moment she dies, and there was no chance for resistance. But in Morris's version, Dido's inner anger is amplified, and her inner activities and thoughts are presented in front of the audience with powerful body language, which triggers people's thinking: Since ancient times, women have not been easy, how come women can only accept and endure when they are oppressed? There is no change in the ending, and Dido does not have any chance for resistance— still, she dies for love, but Morris expresses Dido's inner activity to encourage everyone, not only women, to speak out for themselves and live for themselves.

The idea of serving the royal family permeated the early operas, which were not universally accepted, either in content or performance. Some people, because of the emergence of new things, discriminate in gender such as men and women on the same stage, cross-dressing, and so on; Also, there was a lot of controversy over singing and performance. A journalist at the time described the Opéra as a "repository for indecency, adultery, prostitution, the most disgraceful villainy; in a word, a refuge for all depravities, all vices" [2]. Even in the theaters, which was the place where all the squalor and unsavoryness was exposed. The sinister nature of human nature lies in people's habit of

trying to hide their unsightly side. The aristocratic appreciation of opera art at that time can be said to be nonsense. They would consider theatrical performances to be filthy, and the opera director would euphemistically disguise the side of human nature that the world considers filthy. In William's version, he did not show the story of Dido and Aeneas having sex in the original script directly, and the whole theater was like a fairy tale world, making the audience feel that this was just an opera, and the actors and the audience were separated, so the audience could stay out of the opera, which is to say, to watch the play. The director focuses on the gorgeous stage presentation, visual and auditory art incisively and vividly presented to the audience, but only on the surface, just a simple interpretation of the script. In the plot, the expression does not let the audience immersive.

Deviant opera, like the theater of cruelty, seeks a "theater that wakes us up, heart and nerves," whose value lies in "the agonizing magic relationship to reality and danger [2]. From this perspective, deviant stagings are preoccupied with a longing for authenticity on behalf of opera; their focus of attention is precisely theater's relation to reality and danger. In the early opera, it was too realistic to hurt actors with instruments in the theater. Nevertheless, since the play is performed on the stage, it would be meaningless for the audience to watch it if reality were completely reproduced on the stage. William G and Timothy J (2020) discussed music as an object or an activity in their work *What Is Sociological about Music?* In the dance version of *Dido and Aeneas*, Morris chose to express his heartfelt feelings with the use of the body. But he transforms them into modern, eclectic pieces rather than merely restaging them. While attentive to musical structure, he disregards original choreographic styles set to it. He projects warm humanity in his dances but refuses to mystify human nature. He avoids rigid gender distinctions in dance presenting multifaceted expressions of gender and sexuality [9]. Morris used his unique choreography and storytelling to tell the story, to show the social views and discrimination on sex with actors' dances, and to remind people to face the natural things of the human body rather than dirty things. For instance, in the dance drama, Morris and Guillermo stretch their bodies with dance moves at the beginning of Act Three, when Dido and Aeneas are making love, demonstrating human behavior through the art of dance. And he never hesitates to reveal dancers' bodies to make his point [9].

Morris treats music as an activity, He focuses on the combination of music and dance, that is, the music is the actor and the actor is the music rather than the accompaniment and the collaboration of the voice. It does not have to be a fancy curtain call. With a very simple stage and lighting arrangement, combined with the same costumes of men and women, the audience can know which scene to switch in each scene, with the cooperation of actors and lights, and the rhythm of the music. When the first scene switches to the witch's cave, with the green light and everyone stomping their feet blindfolded, it is grim and serious, and it is not as quiet as it was in the palace. Whereby the social situation of readers shapes how they interpret novels. Music scholarship provides important evidence of this contingent meaning by problematizing how musical content gets into people's minds, bodies, and especially their activities [10]. This dance opera reflected the current situation at that time. Although it was presented as performing art, it contains some elements of performance art which is controversial nowadays [11]. People are put off by the art form, which reflects society and the inner thoughts of artists, and others believe

that traditional works should not be broken by modern times. It is worth thinking about finding a balance among the many voices to activate traditional opera.

4 Conclusion

All in all, In the adaptation of *Dido in Morris's* version, it can be seen that the work from auditory to visual has only changed the way of appreciating opera, but it has not affected the core, starting point, and emotional expression of the whole original story. This inspired me that music can be expressed in various ways. Not only can focus more on the auditory but also can focus on the visual. Changing opera into dance drama is a surprising and unexpected form of musical expression. Morris said that it was a big problem how to express every music section with the body. It reminds me of another way of reproducing the original work, enlarging the twists and turns in the opera in the form of drama. The actors' expression is more exaggerated, the fluctuation of their voice and pitch is greater, and the audience would have immersive experiences through the stage effect with the use of modern technology. There are tons of ways of activating court opera, and there is no limitation of remaining the tradition or being creative. It depends on people's needs about art, pure music, pure recitation and even the absence of actors on the stage can bring the visual and auditory feast to the audience.

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