

# The Call of Subjectivity: Audience-oriented Musical Drama “Les Miserables”

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**Abstract**—Because of the successful transplantation and adaptation of the great literature and the carrying forward of the universal humanitarian spirit in the mass media era, the musical “Les Miserables” has become the immortal work in the musical history. From the perspective of audience analysis, the producer of “Les Miserables” took full consideration of the inculturation of the major contemporary audience, the universality of the audiences and the diversification of artistic needs, and employed a special expression technique that the music motivation of the characters was exclusive and the theme melody was shared and thus made “Les Miserables” a wonderful artistic enjoyment for the audience and being sang all over the world.

**Keywords**—audience-oriented; subjectivity; musical “Les Miserables”

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1980s, “Les Miserables” was adapted into musical by the British producer Cameron Mackintosh, French songwriter Alain Boublil and composer Claude-Michel Schoenberg. In the play, the epic historical background, shocking storyline, detailed and exquisite character portrayal, magnificent music melody, simple and smooth lyrics and grand visual stage design won highly praise from the whole world music fans and even made them go crazy on it. Viewing from the relationship between media and audience, the success of the musical “Les Miserables” firstly lied in the audience-oriented demand that the audience has decisive influence on music works; secondly, the powerful production of media that the commercial operation in the information age ensures the success of the musical drama; thirdly, the creator adopted a special artistic technique that the music motivation of the characters was exclusive and the theme melody was shared; so as to meet the diversified needs of audiences.

## II. LITERARY TEXT AND MUSICAL DRAMA: SUBJECTIVE TURN OF THE STATUS OF AUDIENCES

The key idea and the behavior of the characters of “Les Miserables” of the great French writer Victor Hugo worth much interpretation that make this “social epic” novel with enduring charm. After the twentieth Century, with the development of radio, film, television and other media technology, the audio-visual works of “Les Miserables” have been published one after another. In 1978, the musical tragedy

“Les Miserables” won high praise after its debut in Paris and became an example of the epic novel being adapted into musical drama.

The success of musical “Les Miserables” not only reflected the vitality of classical literature, but also embodied the innovation of mass cultural media, which indicates the coming of the audience-oriented era. Denis McQuail believed that audience is the product of the social environment and the way of specific media supply. The audience has experienced a long process of development, and the audience media also has distinctive social and environmental characteristics. The earliest audience can be traced back to ancient Greece and ancient Rome, “audiences of media were originated from the audience of ancient sports games and the early public drama and music performance.” [1] The audience at that time was a passive receiver, and people’s attitude towards the mass media is obedience and awe. After the fifteenth Century, with the emergence of printing technology and the popularity of paper text, there appeared the earliest mass media audience --- the reading public, whom is a semi-active and semi-passive group. After the twentieth Century, the center of the media has been inclining to the social audience. The popularity of various texts and books showed that the social audience can participate in the selection actively and their status as the main part has been rising gradually. McQuail said that “the invention of film and the emerging of cinema playing opened a new period in the history of media development... the film has created the real “mass audience” in real sense”. [1] By the middle of the twentieth Century, broadcasting and television expanded the space and time range of communication, and the development of media technology created the contemporary audience.

The process from literary text to musical “Les Miserables” is an example of audience turning from semi dominant role to the dominant role. Book reading is a typical communication process that the audience is relatively active but also passive, which has lasted for hundreds of thousands of years in the state of writer writing and me reading. Although musical drama was originated in ancient Greece 2,000 years ago, modern musicals are the typical product of human entertainment in the twentieth Century. It is a new type of stage play which integrates singing, dialogue, performance, dance and art, etc., and is the product of the audience-oriented era. One of the features of audience-orientation is that in addition to retain different audience groups, the target of media communication have developed

from minority to popular. Therefore, Chicago social school calls the modern audience as “mass audience” and distinguishes it from the concept of audience “group”, “cluster” and “public” in the traditional society.

According to the contemporary media market operation mechanism, the musical “Les Miserables” has a clear consumer target, whom willing to appreciate music and drama. From the perspective of audience analysis, the audience of musical drama has dual identity --- group audience in the mass audience. On the one hand, they are the mass audience of the mass communication in the process of globalization; on the other hand, they are the successor of those who watch “drama and music performance” in ancient city, the special audience in the “group” and “cluster”. Denis McQuail pointed out that, “studies of the mass audience have found that there are some evidences that “group” never disappeared in real sense even in large industrialized cities that seem inappropriate to exist. This research is regarded as the “rediscovery of the group”. [1] Contemporary audience has a two-way influence on the creation of literature and art works and the development of media industry. The adaptation process of many literary classics into music, drama and film is the process of the interaction between propagation medium and audience. When the musical “Les Miserables” was first performed in Paris Gymnasium on September 17, 1980, over 500,000 French audiences have watched the performance in 16 weeks, and millions of audiences around the world watched it in the following 30 years, which proved the power of “group audience” among the mass audience.

### III. FRENCH VERSION AND ENGLISH VERSION: THE GLOBALIZATION OF AUDIENCE

After the premiere of French version musical “Les Miserables” in Paris, it has won great praise from the public, but barely anyone knew it outside France. In 1982, Mackintosh and Boublil worked together to adapt it into English version. On Oct. 8, 1985, the unveiling of English version “Les Miserables” in London Barbican Theatre was a great success. In 1987, the English version “Les Miserables” was performed in Broadway in New York and won Tony Awards for best musical and other 8 awards, became the classic musical works in the twentieth Century. The adaptor of the musical “Les Miserables” has a thorough understanding of the original work. He adapted the literary image into music image and enriched the work with performance manners of dancing, drama, and stage design, etc. Although the plot and structure are simplified, it can still reflect the spirit of justice, equality and humanitarianism in the original work. The last sentence before Jean Valjean’s death pointed out the central idea of the musical, “to love another person is to see the face of god”.

The great success of the English version musical “Les Miserables” lies in the agreement between propagation medium and the audience group. Firstly, the major reason of why the French version musical “Les Miserables” didn’t performed worldwide is that the spatial and geographical scope of the French language cannot be compared with that of English and the loss of original meaning and aesthetic meaning of French lyrics in the process of translation. In the modern media system, the number of population and the degree of

language communication often play a decisive role. In the global language environment, English is the only language that can compete with the Chinese audience in terms of population use. However, in terms of language discourse power, Chinese audience is not that popular and wide as the English audience. It was hard for the French version musical “Les Miserables” to go out of France or Europe if it didn’t adapted into English.

On the other hand, music audience is the active recipient and aesthetic subject of contemporary music. They decide the popular music and the trend of popular music. “Mass audience” is the product of modern industrialized social space, however, in the face of classical literature and art, only the “group” audience can finally specify what kind of literature and art services are needed from the media. According to McQuail’s opinion, although the development of communication technology, the increase of media and the enrichment of communication means theoretically open the way for the diversity of communicators, the audience construction is developed in two opposite directions: one is the growth of a larger mass audience as a product of the media’s industrialization; another is the emerging of the professional audience of new media channel and products by the segmentation and differentiation of the audience. The audience of musical is generally a professional group audience. Although the group is expanding, they have always been a minority of the mass audience. And without them, good musical would not be made.

Thirdly, the popularity of English version musical “Les Miserables” all over the world is closely related to the commercial and secular features of modern musicals. Musical that emerged in the twentieth Century were essentially the product of modernity in industrialized societies. It followed the general law of commodity production and embodied the spiritual orientation of capitalism. Therefore, the commercial attributes of musical and the secular entertainment of the audience predetermined the track of production. The potential motivation comes from the commercial pursuit of capital and the artistic pursuit of consumer groups. Mackintosh believed that excellent musical is not “created” but “produced”. The French musical “Les Miserables” was fine in creation but bad in production, and resulted into the failure in France; the success of English version “Les Miserables” can be credited to the excellent creation and production. From the sharp contrast, we can see that under the condition of modern media, the whole process of planning, making and creating of literature and art works needs the participation of industrialized and commercialized operation, so as to guarantee the output of benefits.

### IV. MOTIVATION EXCLUSIVE AND MELODY SHARING: DIVERSIFIED APPRECIATION DEMANDS OF THE AUDIENCE

In the transmission of music in modern society, the demands of the audience group have a decisive role in the performance of music. In the creation of songs of “Les Miserables”, the basic approach of employing music theme rather than single piece of music to compose the whole musical was adopted. This technique was mainly reflected in two aspects: one is to display personal motivation through the presentation of unique personal music theme and the

development musical idea; and second is to deepen the expression of story through the shared theme music melody of the group.

Personal music motivation exclusive refers that the composer sets the individual theme music for the protagonist in the play. For example, there are two melodies that exclusively belong to the key character Jean Valjean that played in "Who am I" and "God on high" respectively. The theme pitch interval of "Who am I" has big jump and was various in the length and speed of lyrics, which symbolized the vitality and strength of his life, as well as the image of rebirth. Before the end of the first act, when everyone was waiting for the revolution, Jean Valjean sang "One day more", which was the theme melody of "Who am I", but different in lyrics. The theme melody of Cossette was "Castle on the cloud". The first time she sang this melody was in the child's voice. Several years later, young lady Cossette still sang the melody of "Castle on the cloud" but changed the lyrics. The nursery rhyme was soothing and simple, like pure and simple Cossette. The theme melody of Javert was stable and urgent in rhythm, and continued going downward, making people feel rigid and harsh, represented the strictness of law. As the antagonists, the theme melody of the hotel owner the Thenardiers was in sharp contrast to other protagonists, the jumping rhythm, humorous style and special orchestrate made it full of ridiculous and ironic meaning, and thus the whole musical kept balance in values. Personal music motivation exclusive endowed the main characters with unique personality traits, and made the musical clear in music structure, and finally drew a social picture with distinctive characters during the Great Revolution.

The sharing of group theme melody refers that when a person's situation or character changes, the same theme melody is repeatedly used. This kind of music creation technique became the sign to judge the change of character's psychology and emotion. For example, the theme melody of redemption between Fantine and Jean Valjean appeared many times in the play. It first appeared when Fantine was treated unfairly in the factory and she longed for Jean Valjean's redemption; the second time was when Fantine called Cossette's name in the hospital bed, she longed for Jean Valjean's redemption of little Cossette; the last time was sang by Jean Valjean before his death, and he prayed for God to take him to heaven. The same melody was sung by different people on different occasions and expressed the same theme of redemption. For another example, Jean Valjean and Javert's confrontation has been clearly presented in "The Confrontation". The first and second sentences sang by Javert used the theme melody of "Look Down" in the opening that reflected the prisoners' suffering and debt, and the same theme also appeared in the chorus section of poor people on the streets in Paris ten years later, full of deep meanings. In addition, Jean Valjean and Javert faced the almost same dilemma when Jean Valjean chose to cleanse the heart from sin in the first act and Javert committed suicide in the second act. They were going to give up the faith they have firmly believed for so long. At this time, the theme melody and even the lyrics of the two was almost the same: "I am reaching but I fall, I'll escape now from the world, from the world of Jean Valjean". The reappearance and alternation of the theme music

form a wonderful echo. The melody and the texts are shared by the opposite characters, but the precise correspondence is achieved.

It is not common in musical creation to share the same musical theme with different roles to express similar emotions. However, "Les Miserables" used this approach frequently and effectively. The creation concept and technique of achieving the unity of dramatic expression and musical expression through the deformation and repetition of music theme and music synesthesia emphasized the narrative tension of the story, and has a strong guiding role for the audience to understand the temperament and fate of the character, satisfied the audiences' diversified appreciation needs.

## V. CONCLUSION

The musical "Les Miserables" is the product of mutual demand and mutual satisfaction between the media and the audience. Recalling its birth process, we can see that under the guidance of the audience-oriented concept, the playwright combines elegance and popularity, and creates a popular repertoire, which has been widely spread all over the world. As said by McQuail, "the old mode still existed (the popular content has a large audience), and probably would lasted for a long time, because it met the needs of individuals, communicators and the society --- sharing leisure and entertainment in a group environment is a social need." [1] Indeed, in the music world, what disappeared is the boundary between countries and nations and what erased is the obstacles of language and writing, and what left are the fusion of human soul and the embodiment of common pursuit.

## REFERENCES

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