

3. MAD SCENES: A WARNING AGAINST OVERWHELMING PASSIONS

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Abstract: *This study focuses on mad scenes in poetry and musical theatre, stressing that, according to Aristotle's theory on catharsis and the Affektenlehre, they had a pedagogical role on the audience. Some mad scenes by J.S. Bach, Handel and Mozart are briefly analyzed, highlighting their most relevant textual and musical characteristics.*

Key words: *Affektenlehre, Austro-German composers of the eighteenth century, catharsis, hallucinations, rage*

1. Madness in poetry, drama, and music

The performance of madness, fury, or delusion has a strong tradition in lyric poetry, tragedy, comedy, and in musical theater. Since antiquity, many poets, authors and playwright included in their works mad scenes; in musical theater works, because of their textual and musical features, some of these pieces were termed with the Italian locutions *aria di pazzia*, *aria di strepito*, or *aria agitata*. It is interesting to notice that mad scenes were a usual topic also in the periods in which the prevailing philosophies suggested to control one's own passions. For instance, during the time spanning from the fourth century B.C. to the first century A.D, called Hellenistic period, in which the most prominent schools of thought were Stoicism, Epicureanism and Cynicism, all of them recommended that the individual should not undergo heavy emotions that would distract him from attaining moral and intellectual perfection.

Stoicism affirmed that through the development of self-control an individual could overcome destructive emotions and understand the universal reason; Epicureanism encouraged the subject to pursue moderation, suppressing unnecessary desires and emotions; and Cynicism recommended to achieve eudaimonia, avoiding arrogance, which causes negative emotions, and on the contrary living under the guidance of reason and virtue (Miller and Inwood, 2003). In this way human beings could live in an organized society, where everyone had a certain role and specific tasks, performing which both the individual and the whole society could develop and improve. On the contrary, if an individual sets aside his society's rule, and chooses to behave according to a different view, he outcasts himself from the benefits and protections of normal society, undermining the proper balance between his own needs and the needs of the society he lives in.

In refusing to comply with social norms the disturbed person dissociates to a greater or lesser extent from others: following his inner conflict, and surrendering to emotional forces, the (maybe just temporarily) mentally ill descends in a pathological way into egoism. Whereas, above all in the Roman Republic society, sane subjects considered their duty to fix their gaze outside of

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themselves, on parents, ancestors and the needs of the state, the insane subject showed to be incapable of the outward direction demanded by the social compact, and therefore could not maintain a proper relationship with them. The social norms established that heavy passions could distract the madman from his role and his social duty to such an extent that he entered in a self-centered state and fell increasingly into selfishness.

Using modern terms, borrowed from the lexicon of psychology, we could say that a madman was considered in antiquity as someone who exceeded the normal tendency to passion and self-indulgence, losing the usual controls set by ego and superego. Therefore, surrendering to strong passions was deemed not only as being dangerous for the individual, but also as disrupting social norms. Who deviated from the duty-oriented cultural code was considered as entering a malign spiral bringing the madman into an id-like state, totally indecorous for a human being because contrary to the prescripts of human civilization. People prone to madness, furor, or rage were compared to wild animals or untamed force of nature.

What could cause a violent crisis of insanity? In the early antiquity madness was deemed to be a spiritual affliction caused by angry divinities which wittingly drove mad a person in order to fulfill their goals. Besides, also in the Christian tradition the term devil originates from the Greek *diabolos*, which means “the who who divides”. The devil is deemed able to separate an individual from his community, and to splitting his inner self. In fact, perceiving alternate realities because of his crisis of insanity, the insane subject may shift back and forth between fury and rage, on the one hand, and hallucinations and irrational beliefs, on the other hand. If insanity was considered as extremely pernicious both for the individual and the society he lives in, why did lyric poets and playwrights so often include mad scenes in their works? The most likely answer is, according to Aristotle’s theory on *catharsis* (Aristotle, 2013), that the aim of such an inclusion was to allow the audience the opportunity to experience insanity without personally enduring it. Understanding the amoral and antisocial effects deriving from ceding to the overwhelming force of passions, audience could fully commit to maintain their inner strength (Padula, 2010).

2. Music representing emotions

Modern scholars associate display and perception of emotion with specific musical acoustic or structural cues: among the acoustic features there are speed, loudness, pitch, timbre, which likely have an origin in vocal expressions of emotions in speech (Juslin and Laukka, 2003). Structural features include tonal mode (major or minor), melodic contour, harmonic and melodic intervals, and ornamentation. The interpretation of some features may have a biological basis: for instance dissonance is innately disliked (Trainor & Heinmiller, 1998), whereas the emotional effect of other clues, such as the different meanings of keys, is related to specific cultural tradition. In particular, ornamentation can vary the perceived tempo, by adding a great number of notes of small value, and the relationship between consonance and dissonance, giving preeminence to the

dissonant elements of a passage. Research on the emotional content of music was developed through the centuries: the *Affektenlehre* was developed during the Baroque era, basing on the idea that passions could be represented alluding to the rhythmic-prosodic features of verbal utterances, allowing the public to observe the outward signs of passions without getting involved in them.

Among the theorists who discussed the technique that could be used in order to show different passions, were Rameau and Mattheson. Rameau (1683-1764), an important French composer and music theorist of the Baroque era, wrote in his *Traité d'harmonie*: "*Harmony may unquestionably excite different passions in us depending on the chords that are used. There are chords which are sad, languishing, tender, pleasant, gay, and surprising. There are also certain progressions of chords which express the same passions*" (Rameau, 2012, p. 154). And a few lines later: "*Languor and suffering may be expressed well with dissonances by borrowing and especially with chromaticism (...). Despair and all passions which lead to fury or strike violently demand all types of unprepared dissonances, with the major dissonances particularly occurring in the treble. In certain expressions of this nature, it is even effective to pass from one key to another by means of an unprepared major dissonance, as long as the ear is not too greatly offended by an overly large disproportion between the two keys*" (Rameau, 2012, p. 155).

The German composer and theorist Johann Mattheson (1681-1764), maybe due to his complementary training as a singer, focused rather on melody, and affirmed that "*Whereas if one knows that sadness is a contraction of these subtle parts of our body, then it is easy to see that the small and smallest intervals are the most suitable for this passion*" (Mattheson, 1981, p. 104). And some pages later: "Anger, ardor, vengeance, rage, fury, and all other such violent affections, are actually far better at making available all sorts of musical inventions than the gentle and pleasant passions which are handled with much more refinement. Yet it is also not enough with the former if one only rumbles along strongly, makes a lot of noise and boldly rages: notes with many tails will simply not suffice, as many think; but each of these violent qualities requires its own particular characteristics, and, despite forceful expression, must still have a becoming singing quality: as our general principle, which we must not lose sight of, expressly demands" (Matheson, 1981, p. 108). Some Baroque musicians focused on the emotional characteristics displayed by the different keys (Bartolus: 1614; Charpentier: 1690; Roussseau: 1691; Rameau: 2012; Mattheson: 1739). They highlighted that in most cases major keys were appropriate to depict gaiety, majesty, brilliance, triumph, jollity, and nobility; in contrast, minor keys could represent sadness, melancholy, darkness, lugubriousness, and loneliness.

3. Mad scenes in Handel, Bach and Mozart

It is interesting to briefly analyze three renowned mad scenes composed during the eighteenth century by musicians belonging to the Austro-German music tradition, and compare their musical characteristics with the emotional content of their texts. For instance, in Georg Friedrich Händel's opera *Orlando*,

the text focuses on Orlando, a soldier from Charlemagne's army who falls in love with Angelica. But Angelica is already in love with Medoro; discovering her betrayal, Orlando is driven mad from jealousy. In his major mad scene he alternatively becomes angry and suffers from delusions, in which he imagines to encounter some mythical creatures of the Underworld, as Cerberus, Charon and Proserpina. During this scene there are many abrupt shifts in mood, highlighted in the structure which joins a *recitativo accompagnato* (*Ah stigie larve*), an *arioso* (*Già latra Cerbero*), a *recitativo secco* (*Ma la Furia*), a *A tempo di gavotta* (*Vaghe pupille*), stressing Orlando's unstable mind-set. Rage and fury are depicted in the fast *arioso* *Già latra Cerbero*⁵



Handel, *Orlando*

and in the coloratura passages of the *rondo Vaghe pupille*⁶

⁵ Translation of the text of this excerpt: "Now Cerberus begins to howl/and out of Hell/ all kinds of/ horrid Furies/ come toward me!"

⁶ Translation of the text of this excerpt: "I am deaf to your spells, and my rage will not be quelled".

-ror, nò, nò, nò, non calmail mio fu -ror, che

sor.do al vo-stro in-can-to, che sor.do al vo-stro in-can-

-to, ho un co-re

Handel, *Orlando*

whereas delusions and melancholy, alluded to by slow tempo, little intervals, and legato, are depicted in some bars of the *recitativo secco*⁷.

⁷ Translation of this excerpt: "Ah! Proserpina weeps?/Now my rage abates/ for I see that even in Hell one weeps for love"

A fagio.

A Pro-ser-pi-na in braccio ve-do che fug-ge, or a strep-par-la io corro— Ah!

Pro-ser-pi-na piange? *Vien me-no il mio fu-ro-re, se si pian-ge all' in-*

A tempo di Gavotta.

Viol. unis. piano.

-fer-na an-co d'a-mo-re! *Va-ghe pu-pil-le, nò, non pian-ge-te, nò,*

Handel, *Orlando*

Many works by Johann Sebastian Bach include examples of *aria agitata*: one is included in the *Cantata* BWV 40. Here the text alludes to the final fight between Jesus and the devil, and is marked by a quick tempo, a minor tonality, and leaps and coloratura passages in the vocal part⁸.

der dir den Kopf als ein Sie-ger zer-knickt, ist nun ge-bo-ren,

Bach, *Cantata* BWV 40

⁸ Translation of the text of this excerpt: "He who will crash your head as victor".

A further example is included in the *St. Matthew Passion*. Here Judas desperately regrets that he betrayed Jesus, singing a vehement, rhythmically irregular piece, characterized by wide-ranging lines and rapid runs, in duet with the solo violin, whose part is also characterized by furious virtuosity⁹.

Violin I (vi.) and Bass (B.) parts from the *St. Matthew Passion*. The lyrics are: "seht. das Geld, den Mör-der - lohn, wirft euch der verlor-ne Sohn zu den Fü - ßen nie - der."

Bach, *St. Matthew Passion*

Mozart includes some mad scenes in his opera *Idomeneo*: the Greek princess Elettra has feelings for Idamante, the son of the king of Crete. In the first act Elettra is crazy of jealousy because she fears that Ilia, a Trojan princess, could marry Idamante, and imagines that Furies from Hades are tormenting her¹⁰.

Excerpt from Mozart's *Idomeneo*, featuring Elettra's mad scene. The lyrics are: "fu - rie del cru - do a - ver - - no, fu - rie del cru - do a - ver - - no, Fu - rien des schwarzen Ha - - des, Fu - rien des schwar-zen Ha - - des,"

Mozart, *Idomeneo*

Elettra's madness is depicted by means of a speed tempo, a minor key, wide leaps and strong *sforzati*, alluding to desperate cries. In the third act, hearing that her rival will in effect marry Idamante and become queen of Crete, Elettra expresses her desperation in a pivotal mad scene¹¹. Here Mozart depicts Elettra's

⁹ Translation of the text of this excerpt: "See, the money, the murderer's fee/tossed at your feet by the lost son!"

¹⁰ Translation of the text of this excerpt: "In my heart I feel you all, Furies of bitter Hades!"

¹¹ Translation of the text of this excerpt: "Tear open my heart, serpents, or a sword will put an end to my sorrow".

insanity by means of an anxiety-inducing orchestral accompaniment, creating a harmonically unstable environment sprinkled with dissonances, which drives forward her anger and rage, expressed by means of brief, fragmented cries.

The image displays a page from a musical score for Mozart's *Idomeneo*. It features a vocal line (soprano) and a complex orchestral accompaniment. The score is written in G major and 2/4 time. The vocal line includes the following lyrics:

da. Squarcia - te mi il co - re, ce - ra - ste, ser - pen - ti, squarcia - te mi il co - re, squar.
 brant. Zerfleischt diesen Bu - sen, ihr gif - ti gen Schlangen, zerfleischt diesen Bu - sen, ihr

The orchestral accompaniment is highly complex, featuring multiple staves for various instruments, including strings, woodwinds, and brass. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* (piano), *f* (forte), and *cresc.* (crescendo). The overall mood is one of intense emotion and drama, reflecting the character's insanity and rage.

Mozart, *Idomeneo*

4. Conclusions

Comparing the musical excerpts with the texts referring to them, we notice that music and text convey the same sense, and that music magnifies the meaning of the words, touching the imagination of the audience with great immediacy. In doing so, both music and text can fulfill their role, displaying the pernicious effects of negative emotions, and thus representing a warning to the audience to remain in control of oneself, not ceding to excessive passions.

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