

A FORMAL AND STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST PIECES FROM THE MUSICAL 'MY FAIR LADY'

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Abstract

*The musical is a characteristic American genre of performance, still quite little known and represented in the Romanian cultural space and it is considered the most original contribution of the Americans to the development of theatre. It is a form of performance that combines music and spoken dialogue, acting and dancing, in which the dramatic thread and the entire emotional content of the play is rendered in equal proportions through words, music, movement, scenery, in a unified whole. The musical *My Fair Lady* is one of the most accomplished and complex creations of the genre and our paper aims at investigating two representative pieces of this musical from a stylistic and formal perspective, by analysing the performances of four outstanding vocal artists, emblematic of the paramount importance of music education in the cultural background.*

Keywords: *musical, multicultural, libretto, linguistics, phonetics, education, music education.*

"My Fair Lady"¹, one of the most successful and widely known musicals, was from the outset an impressive multicultural collaboration, which was based on a play by the Anglo-Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw², a musical score composed by the Austrian Frederck Loewe and a libretto written by the American Alan Jay Lerner, the vivacity of the songs, choreography and jazz rhythms being typically American³. In order to analyse two

¹ Lerner, Alan Jay, (1958) *My Fair Lady, A Musical Play in Two Acts*, The New American Library, New York

² Shaw, George Bernard, (1999), *Pygmalion*, Bartleby, New York

³ Bloom, Ken, (2004), *Broadway Musicals. The 101 Greatest Shows of All Time*, New York p. 74.

representative pieces from the musical 'My Fair Lady', I have chosen to use the performances of four musical and/or artistic personalities, firstly because of their importance in the history of the representation of this work and secondly to highlight the differences between them, both in terms of their vocal nature and personality, and in terms of their technique and musical training.

Thus, Julie Andrews, as the first interpreter of the role of Eliza Doolittle, the main female character of this musical, stands out both for her wealth of experience in the singing of the musical and for her temperament, both vocal and personal, youthful and full of verve; Audrey Hepburn, an actress full of nobility and depth, manages, without the benefit of extensive vocal training, to convey the character's features naturally and sensitively, at least in the passages that were preserved in her voice in the final version of the movie; Marni Nixon, through her thorough vocal training and the rigor of an experienced voice-over artist, inserts her vocal performance as faithfully and believably as possible into the acting and visual dimension of the film, which are outside of her; finally, Kiri Te Kanawa, a specialist in opera singing as well as a temperamental and complex artistic personality, courageously and freshly approaches almost the entire musical work in an orchestral recital, harmoniously combining the principles of classical singing with the freedoms and effects of freer and more 'actorly' singing.

In the aria 'Just you wait' we distinguish an entirely new, surprising side of the character Eliza, who, feeling terrorized by Professor Higgins' phonetics lessons, dreams of diverse ways to get rid of him. The character's explosive, yet picturesque aggressiveness makes this the most difficult to perform, especially for professional singers. For example, Julie Andrews resorts to an aggressive, rudimentary sound, pressed on the vocal cords, again nasal, with accents like those in the spoken register. The character of the piece is animated, even rushed, which reflects the mood of the character at this point in the development of the action.

We can notice the initial indication of *Pesante (Heavy)* which is reflected, with different nuances, in the interpretation of the three singers, not by the construction of the piece itself, which is dynamic, but by the particularity of the sound to be compressed, edgy, sharp (without being high-pitched), in contrast to certain delicate and noble sounds

in the preceding piece. Thus, in Julie Andrew's interpretation, in bars 19, 23, 29, 30⁴ and especially in the final bars of the piece, bars 63-66, in keeping with the text, we distinguish passages in which the voice emits a series of distorted sounds, almost contradicting the concept of "singing".

In the first half of this piece, Marni Nixon 's performance is slightly more detached compared to Julie Andrews': the character's raging frustration is expressed through a darker colour of voice and sounds that are not so distorted and that portray a slightly more restrained, internalized aggression. Starting with the *Amabile* cue, which the soloist follows to the letter, the sound is totally transformed, becoming closer to that used in the two preceding arias. Even in the finale of this piece, the climax of Eliza's furious outburst, Marni Nixon's interpretive choices are less daring than Julie Andrews': she chooses not to alter her vocal sound to the point of distortion, while retaining her vindictiveness.

As for the third performer, this piece confirms once again that Kiri Te Kanawa generally (with the exception of the final part) retains the identity of her vocal instrument, resorting to other solutions to portray her character's unbridled rage: the phrases in the middle register are lowered in impostation, but never ostentatiously, the onomatopoeic sounds in measures 19, 23, 63, 64⁵ ("Oh, ho, ho", etc) being attacked in a very theatrical manner, while retaining a certain vocal suppleness. She also gives clear impulses to certain final consonants, pronouncing them very explosively, to express very suggestively the idea of outrage and outburst: "sick", "quick". Because the first half of this aria was certainly more elegantly sung by Kiri Te Kanawa compared to the other two singers, in terms of her vocal delivery, the difference between the two episodes of this first part, *Pesante* and *Amabile*, is less significant.⁶

Thus, preferring this interpretative manner at the end of the piece, she chooses, like Julie Andrews, to take melodic liberties, changing the pitch of the notes: in bar 62, the

⁴ Lerner, Alan Jay, *op.cit*, p 58

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 63

⁶ It is interesting to note, however, that in the final part, *Allegro martiale*, especially in its last five bars (63-67), the singer no longer uses her vocal instrument, she resorts this time to a palette of vocal artifices similar to those used by the other two performers, especially Julie Andrews, namely highly distorted sounds: compressed, string-pressed, glottalized, nasalized, emitted in both the low and high registers.

note 'la" is sung an octave lower and the note 'do' an octave higher, thus in a much wider ambitus than that indicated in the score, the contrast between the low and high notes, which are thus almost two octaves apart, having an expressive value, giving an added dramatic value to this scene. Also, in measures 64 and 65 the notes are played in the upper octave, the sound being, as I have already mentioned, distorted: emitted in a shouted, even screamed register.

Moreover, although this is only a recital and not a full performance, Kiri Te Kanawa's acting, particularly in this piece, is absolutely impressive, brilliant, worthy of a great artist: her facial expressions, posture, gestures and voice are used to create a character that is both picturesque and truthful.

In terms of formal analysis, the beginning of the aria is marked by a brief piano introduction in the key of *C minor*, measure 4/4, tempo *Pesante*, which mirrors the character's overwhelming feeling. The accompaniment begins with a right-hand trill in *fortissimo*, the left hand emphasizing by a gradual descant each beat of the measure. The voice and the piano are in unison, and rhythmically the short and long durations alternate. We can notice that when the voice stops on the long notes, the accompaniment does not stop, but continues, manifesting itself as a response to the voice.

Throughout the work, at the melodic level we encounter a series of modulations and modulatory inflections in close keys, such as relative E flat Major, B flat Major, A flat Major, the homonymous C Major, but also distant keys, such as E flat minor, C flat Major, D flat Major, D Major. These modulations often occur abruptly and are also accompanied by changes in tempo. Thus, throughout the aria, we distinguish tempos such as *Amabile*, *Poco piu mosso*, the piece concluding with *Allegro marziale*.

The dynamics are also rich, so that we find a wide range of nuances, from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, *sforzando*, accents, *crescendos* and *decrescendo*. I identified a gradual increase in tempi, from *Pesante* to *Allegro marziale*, this increase is also supported by the rhythmic values, which become shorter and shorter, as for example in the last part of the work, where we reach values of six-sixteenths or six-sixteenths of thirty-sixteenths. Near the end of the aria, at measure 65, is the climax of the work, at which point Eliza imagines her final revenge on Professor Higgins. The vocal range of the work runs between C in the middle octave and E flat in the second octave, the form being ABC.

The aria *Just you wait* is repeated in a brief version at the beginning of the musical's second act, preceded by Higgins' words, along with stage directions illustrating the character's anger. We notice a transformation of Eliza's character in terms of her emotional state: in the aria of the first act she is presented both in the text of the song and through stage directions as furious and at the same time frightened by the threats of the teacher, who bluntly announces that she risks not getting lunch, dinner and especially chocolate if she does not correct her pronunciation. In the second act, however, she is presented in the text as distressed and overcome with seething anger at not having her obvious progress in phonetics recognized and appreciated by the teacher.

Her transformation is also mirrored in her language: the phoneme [h] is no longer removed from the vowel as in the first aria (so, 'enry 'iggins" becomes "Henry Higgins"), and with the exception of a colloquial phrase ("the one it's done to"), Eliza's language is flawless. The lyrics of the second aria *Just you wait* are much shorter and are not found in the text of the first one:

*Just you wait, Henry Higgins, just you wait!
You'll be sorry but your tears'll be too late!
You will be the one it's done to;
And you'll have no one to run to;
Just you wait...⁷*

The accompaniment plays a very important role: it constantly emphasizes Eliza's feelings, in whose interventions we find the dynamic indications *appassionato* and even *molto appassionato*. The voice and the piano intertwine and, what is more, in the final moment, when the voice can no longer complete the melodic line due to emotion, the piano intervenes, finalizing the melodic phrase, while Eliza bursts into tears.

In contrast to the first version of the aria, the one in Act I, the tempo changes so that from *Pesante* it becomes *Agitato e rubato*, the first sounds of the accompaniment dropping in intensity from *fortissimo* to *mezzoforte*. The only parameter that is maintained is that of the measure 4/4.

What stands out in Julie Andrews' performance is that she chooses at times to vocally mark accents that have been written for the orchestra, accents that she realizes with a more

⁷ Lerner, Alan Jay, *op.cit.*, p 86

precise and sustained attack. In addition, by virtue of her training as an actress and musical theatre singer, she proves adept at delivering long agile passages with small intervals and consistent text with flawless diction. She sometimes prefers to abandon the pitches indicated by the score in order to exclaim or declaim a more spoken phrase (bars 8-11, 114-115).⁸

Surprisingly, a term that is reminiscent of Eliza's poor pronunciation in the first part of the musical *My Fair Lady* appears again in the score: "ex-pl'in". Having already been able to pronounce correctly in standard English and realizing that she is now making a conscious, deliberate choice, Eliza prefers to make this initial mistake again, just once, in this play and in this second part of the musical, perhaps to reveal to Freddy her real identity, which she now fully assumes, mature, aware of her inner power. Julie Andrews succeeds in rendering this new attitude of Eliza's with authenticity and artistic conviction.

'*Show me*' is the only song in the entire musical to use the singing voice of Audrey Hepburn, who played Eliza in the movie 'My Fair Lady', and for which she confessed to having prepared herself intensively, taking numerous singing lessons during the making of the movie. However, it is obvious from listening to the recording of this song from the film that she did not have the musical training to give a vocal performance on a par with that of Marni Nixon in the film. Her voice is totally lacking in vocal technique: unsupported, unsupported, not in the correct speaking position, resulting in laryngeal tension; she uses head voice and there is no continuity between the register of the chest voice and the head voice. In addition, the soloist alters the rhythmic structure of the phrase several times.

Although in general there is no phrasing, we can nevertheless distinguish certain vocal colours with expressive subtleties, especially where, semantically, the text of the score is more lyrical and sensual: in bars 134-137:., Haven't your lips longed for my touch? Haven't your arms hungered for mine?" Of course, the charming, overflowing expressiveness of her acting masterfully manages to overshadow these vocal and musical imperfections of the artist.

In the soprano Kiri Te Kanawa 's interpretation, we once again note her round, domed, noble, anchored, full of harmonics. In this piece, as in all the others, we note the complexity

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 92

of the phrasing, which is realized with great suppleness. Once again, with her well-known versatility, she resorts to a colourful palette of interpretative artifices to enhance and emphasize the verbliness characteristic of this score and, indeed, of music in general.

Thus, she gives clear impulses to some consonants, projecting the sound strongly outwards, very frequently on the notes corresponding to the phrase "Show me!". (bars 108, 116, 140, 142, etc); she strongly runs in a few places the consonant „r", singing it and integrating it in the melodic line, in the phrase/words „Read me no rhyme", „dream", „scream". (As usual, always in close correspondence with the meaning of the words on which the notes are written, in order to emphasize their emotional charge, she chooses to air some sounds, as in bars 102, 138-139, 149⁹: „Don't say how much: Show me!") or not to vibrate them at all (bar 120: „in the middle of the *night!*").

Like Julie Andrews, she sometimes prefers not to respect the intervals of the notes as indicated in the score, thus giving primacy to the word, to enhance the fluidity, the flow and thus the meaning of the text: "I'm so sick of words! (bars 89-91), „This is no time for a chat!" (bars 131-132).

The aria does not typically begin with a piano introduction, the melodic line of Freddie's character and that of the accompaniment coming together in a recitative in the key of E Major, tempo *Andantino*, measure 4/4. Throughout we find a modulation to a distant key through the enharmonization of the key of G sharp Major with the key of A flat Major. As in other moments in this musical, the voice is backed by the piano, which throughout the recitative and aria doubles the main melodic line. Freddie's recitative is interrupted by a *Subito agitato* by Eliza's recitative, which is imposed by a *mezzoforte*, given that Freddie's melodic speech is in the *piano*.

Eliza's recitative begins in the key of C Major, maintaining the 4/4 time signature, but it does not remain within these musical parameters for long, so that after 4 bars the aria modulates to the key of G Major, 4/4 time signature, tempo *Molto vivace*.

The aria has a strophic form in which the key of G Major and the measure of 3/4 are maintained, the only indication that appears at the beginning of the aria is *Furiously*. From a

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 94

melodic point of view, we find in the aria a series of modulations and modulatory inflections in keys such as B flat major, D major, E minor and G minor.

In terms of dynamics, throughout the work we find a series of alternating nuances between *piano* and *forte*, which at the end of the work, through a continuous crescendo, support the melodic climax, represented by the last sound of the work, the G in the second octave. In addition to the *piano*, *mezzo forte*, *forte* and *fortissimo*, there are also *crescendos*, *decrescendos*, accents and *sforzando*.

The work has two volts, the second one having a conclusive role and differing from the first by the G sound, which in octaves for five bars. At the same time, the accompaniment is also slightly different, the durations being longer in the second movement, the aria concluding with a pedal on the G sound. The vocal range of the work is between D in the middle octave and G in the second octave, the form is strophic, AA.

We can conclude that Eliza, the main character of this musical, reveals the outstanding role of *education* for the development of human being: through the phonetics lessons, carried out by means of a laborious process of improving her language, she acquires a new identity, transforming herself from the Cockney flower girl in the London suburbs, that she used to be. But not the one who was brilliant at the London Embassy Ball, where she was taken for a princess, but a person who became aware of her enormous inner power.

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