THE IMPORTANCE OF DISABLED PHONATION IN B. BRITTEN'S

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ABSTRACT

The purpose has been to show by acoustical analysis the essential function of Billy Budd's (BB) stammering in relation to the structure, the main characters and the intrinsic value of the opera. Fabrice Raviola, baritone, who has sung Donald's part in the late Genevan performance (March, 1994), has provided us with live singing of BB's stuttered articulation, free of orchestral interferences.

1. THE CORE OF THE OPERA

The very heart of the work is given by the instrumental leitmotiv that appears in Vere's prologue, underlined by a sustained ppp trill. It becomes increasingly strong and insisting when the captain sings: There is always something in it, ... some stammer in the divine speech. Just on the extended final syllable of divine before Vere attacks speech, the clarinets play the theme that will illustrate all of BB's fits. The essence of Britten's drama is comprised in this cell of music: that is the ambiguity between BB's honesty, his helpfulness and the evil which assails him from outside. BB stammers whenever some outstanding emotion is overwhelming him. As to the trill, it is much more extended than the short leitmotif. It indicates BB's acute sensitivity, when we hear it, his psychophysical coherence is splitting up, all his being is shaken. Any other character or happening is than subordinated to the hero's climaxes. While the tremolo sounds free of orchestral interferences.

2. BB's DISABILITY ARTICULATES THE OPERA

There are four crucial events of BB's stammering:

1. near the beginning, when the Master-at-Arms questions BB about his origin (I,1) and the latter sings: They say I was a.../ was a.../ a.../ a.../ a/a foundling /;

2. when BB sees Squeak rummaging in his bag (I,3): Hi! You.../ a.../ a.../ a.../ Come out of that;-

3. when the Novice offers BB money to set up a mutiny (I,3): Why for me? -/ Why ... d'ye think I'd.../ Ah.../ A.../ A.../ -/ Dansker old friend, glad to see you;-

4. after Claggert's false accusation, just before BB carries out his fatal stroke (II,2): Vere: Defend yourself! BB: /-/ a.../ a.../ a.../ Come out of it;-

By their placement, the introductory and the tragic final stammerings are particularly important and more elaborate than the other two. These intermediate ones occur in relative proximity, or more or less half-way between the two outstanding stutterings and they are characterized by a lighter structure. Linking in a wide span BB's debut and his exit, they act as half-time trials.

3. PHONETIC AND MUSICAL SIMILARITIES OF THE FOUR STUTTERS

Besides the presence of the leitmotif in the orchestra, speech is blocked more or less on the same vowel [æ] or [a] during quadruple time (4/4). This one may be preceded (events 1 and 3) and followed (event 1) by 3/4 time but it is basically necessary, especially for Britten's various handlings of syncopation, in order to shape the stammers to the utmost. Quadruple time offers the ideal frame to dislocate syllables by contrapuntal dissonances and ornamentation, to be reset.

4. PARTICULARITIES OF THE FOUR EVENTS OF INHIBITED SPEECH

The First Event (I,1) BB has just joyfully proclaimed: I can sing! The timpani underline the significant final word with a foretelling tremolo. Three-four time rules the first measures of stammering. In the middle of the verb say, the tremolo sounds again and a considerable extension of the syllable begins to unbalance BB's speech. Then, during a syncopated pp stammer, 3/4 time changes into 4/4 time. There follow three decrescendo arsis quaver stutters and another syncopated one.

The rests lengthen. The next two stammers are contiguous, marking despair by redundancy: the one is a quaver, the other moves into a contra tempo, stopping dead like a hiccup. After a last crescendo arsis stammer, 3/4 time is reset and a quickly fired discharge on a quaver brings back fluent speech.

As to the coherence of the opera, it is remarkable that at the break of the antepenultimate stutter, the Second Mate starts singing Vere's statement There is always some flaw in them. (Slight variation) There is to be noticed, too, that the recovery of speech progresses by rebounds. BB sings foundling four times, unfolding the
The Second Event (1,3)

For lack of space, we just want
to compare the shortest and most
isolated stammer of the previous
happening (Fig.7) to the frontal
stammer reduction and its effect
of delay we find during the second
event (Fig.8). Between this reduced
stutter and the preceding one, Red
Whiskers and Dansker insert the
comment: He's a stammerer!

The Third Event (1,3)

It is announced by a striking
expansion of the pronoun why which
breaches the usual syllabic rates.
Psychic and dramatic requirements
justify the singing voice in trans-
gressing phonetic boundaries.

As to the stammering itself, com-
pared with the second happening, it
comprises similar frontal stutter
reduction by a preset rest, asso-
cioted with syncopation.

The Fatal Event (11,2)

Falsely accused, BB is dumbfoun-
ded: his stammer rises from complete
muteness. And immediately after his
fatal stroke, he is silent again. The
stutter is projected straightforward
without any preliminary or subse-
quent swell of syllables and words.
Moreover, it is enacted in an ex-
tremely sharp-cut way: the longest

stammer touches directly the short-
est and strongest discharge(Fig.9).

There is no further stutter in
the opera. The night before being
hunged, BB sings a highly melodious
part which, as it progresses, be-
comes a testimony. It ends with the
repetition of brief phrases, a sort
of phrasal stammer, a far echo of
BB's severe inhibitions. Finally,
there is the inarticulated singing
of the choir.

5. CONCLUSION

BB's fits of aphasia are the fun-
damental knots of the musical drama.
They link the characters by their
acoustical, rhythmical and psychic
constituents and give the opera its
architecture and its symbolic dimen-
sion.

6. REFERENCES

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