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MUS 15

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21 November 2017

The Other and the Self: Exoticism, the Gamelan, and Sexuality

The operatic world of France in the 19th century is a great melting pot of a myriad of styles, distinctive cultures, as well as entertainment flavors. Abundant artistic works revealed on the stage profoundly mirrors the reality outside the theater, including political rivals, chaos in social classes, and most importantly, the status of “Others.” Pure Exoticism is practiced when alien elements, especially non-Western elements, are borrowed from typical foreign culture, forged into Western music. According to the “Exotic Style Only” paradigm, it is assumed that “music is, by compositional intent, exotic - and that it registers as exotic to the listener” (Locke 48); the process includes “othering” exotica with labeled stereotypes. As one end of the spectrum, pure exoticism inherits discrimination upon “inferior” cultures outside the Europe. On the other end, there also exists abundant transcultural composing, where the former side intends “othering” a certain group to retain audience resonance while the latter absorbs these elements yet treat them as equal. Bizet’s *Carmen* is categorized as “pure Exoticism” for it ultimately othered Roma people while Britten’s *Death in Venice* is actually an example of a combination of two sides, falling in the middle of the spectrum.

Bizet’s *Carmen* is known as a work of pure exoticism. Carmen is about a defiant, libertine Gypsy women, Carmen, who seduces a wholesome man Don Jose with sensuality. She eventually destructs his bright future and tries to drop him, ultimately ending in tragedy. Bizet intentionally portrays Carmen as a sexual and larcenous character. In Act 2, the “Flower Song”, Carmen is dressed in whorish corset; she seduces Jose in lascivious moves under exotic Spanish style music; she lifts up her skirt and fondles Jose singing arias. By depicting imagined Carmen as a stereotyping “threatening and alluring” figure, Bizet satisfies the expectation of the audience: They receives Roma people as who makes a living through smuggling, who never settles down in any places or relationships. Carmen wanders in life “without creed which leading to destruction of Jose and her own death” (Frisch 170). Therefore, Bizet others the Roma people and further intentionally seeks for audience’s resonance through utilization of evoking exotic elements. The use of castanets and tambourines music, uncivilized movements of the Carmen, and attitudes from Jose and Carmen towards relationship contrasts to emphasize the exotic Other. For example, musical instruments associated with Carmen’s solo are typically Spanish, while it shifts to be more like familiar western melodies when it comes to Jose’s solo. The sense of othering is deeply emphasized through the juxtaposed familiarity and unfamiliarity from the background of characters. According to Locke, “Beneath the surface, the place (people, social milieu) that is being evoked may be perceived as resembling home in certain ways” (Locke 46). In *Carmen*, characteristics of Jose reflects expected features of a young man such as being aspiring, earnest, serving the country and beloved by the surrounding people. The author of *Carmen* juxtaposed behavior between the “familiar”, or “non-exotic” social groups in home country and the imaginary “exotic” Roma group to stress such insecure feeling when exposing to the French audience. Eventually, *Carmen* achieves unprecedented success in the history of opera.

Compared to *Carmen* which serves as a typical example of pure exoticism, *Death in Venice* stands more likely in the middle of the spectrum. While *Carmen* “others” a certain group using imaginary exotic elements and characters, *Death in Venice* is composed of more authentic Balinese music elements based on the author’s own experience and interpretation-- a blend of the Gamelan style music and western music.

Benjamin Britten’s opera *Death in Venice* narrates a male novelist, Aschenbach, crushes on an adolescent boy Tadzio in his travel to Venice originally planned for getting through his writer’s block. Because of his firm decision on staying with his adoring boy, Aschenbach eventually dies in a Cholera outbreak in the city. Britten adopts a series of Gamelan styles in melodies, though using western instruments, to compose based on percussions, pentatonic scale music as well as repetition of individual instruments layered together, emphasizing and evoking the remoteness of Bali, “a sexual paradise where one could practice "deviant" sex with greater freedom and far less risk of social stigma than one could at home” (Taruskin 256). In his play, Britten blends “authentic Balinese scales (as closely as Western instruments allow) in the seven-tone pelog tuning” in an ensemble of percussion to hint Aschenbach’s adoration, fantasies, and desires towards Tadzio (Taruskin 256). In Act 5, western style percussions filter through Gamelan style to build up tension then Aschenbach sang: “Tadzio. This is it! Tadzio. This is from Tadzios.” The percussions symbolize the tension between mainstream western society in which had seen homosexuality as a psychological disorder and an ideal place of sexual freedom as associated with the Gamelan music. In other words, Britten eventually bridges the gap between image and reality through utilization of the Gamelan music. The transcultural composing plays a role such that evokes the notion that homosexual people actually yearn for sexual freedom. The notion is metaphorically presented. It helps the composer to reveal the untruly expressed inner self as well as the suppression of homosexual people in a “hostile society”(929 Burkholder). It shifts the expression of the traditional “othering” characteristic towards the portrayal of the othered group in society. Therefore, *Death in Venice* should be categorized as a combination of two sides of the spectrum. Without the initiated intention of othering, the work contrasts the ideal and the reality through transcultural composing, and eventually “becomes an indictment of its own contemporary society” (Taruskin 247).

To conclude, both Carmen and Death in Venice successfully introduced exotic music elements on stage. Although the author utilized Exoticism in different degrees and with different intention, both operas reveal the social status of segregated groups outside the stage.

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