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## Specificity of Plot Composition of G.F. Handel's opera "Rinaldo"

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*The article focuses on "Rinaldo", one of the first operas that brought G.F. Handel European fame. According to the researchers, it is considered one of the composer's best masterpieces. However, Russian sources provide with the most general information only. Against the background of the renaissance of baroque opera in stage practice of the XX century there appeared a considerable research interest to a musical theatre of this period and Handel's operatic creative work including. The time to attract attention to a 26-year-old German genius has come. The article attempts to systematize the available information connected with the history of Handel's opera creation, to reveal the specificity of interpretation of the literary primary source in A. Hill's scenario and G. Rossi's libretto, to find out the specific features of the plot composition on the basis of the libretto analysis and its study in the context of theatre traditions within the period from the end of the XVII century till the beginning of the XVIII century.*

*Keywords: theatre, baroque, opera, G. Handel, libretto, A. Hill, G. Rossi, plot composition.*

*Every Englishman believes that Handel now  
occupies an important position in heaven.  
If so, le bon Dieu must feel toward him  
very much as Louis Treize felt toward Richelieu.*

*B. Shaw*

It was the day of February 24, 1711 when G. Handel's "Rinaldo" premièred in the Theatre Royal Haymarket in London. The opera was composed to the order of A. Hill, the theatre director. It was enthusiastically welcomed by the audience and ran for 15 nights during its first theatrical season.

The composition became not only Handel's first opera for the English stage that brought him fame of an opera composer but the first Italian language exemplary opera in the history

of the English theatre. It is no mere chance that "Rinaldo" was staged in many cities of the world: in Prague (June 1923), London (February 1933), at Handel festival in Halle (1954), in Carnegie Hall (1972), Houston (1975), New-York (1984), Madrid (1991), at Munich festival in 2000. In 2001 David Alden, a prolific theater and film director, suggested the post-modernist setting of the opera. Later Handel's masterpiece was performed in La Scala (2005), Zurich (2008),

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Prague (2009), Warsaw (2009), and Versailles (2011). In March 2012 "Rinaldo" was performed in Lyric Opera of Chicago (USA). It was staged by Francisco Negrin to the tercentenary of the opera composition.

Nowadays there are two author's versions of the composition: these of the year of 1711 and the year of 1731. According to many researchers of Handel's creative work, the first version enjoys the widest popularity. They explain this by the fact that it is the original that has a greater vital force and can arouse the audience's deep emotional feelings.

This article will attempt to reveal some peculiar features of the opera plot composition in which various national traditions of baroque opera practice meet.

As for the libretto, it should be mentioned that originally a scenario was written *in English* by Aaron Hill, an English dramatist and miscellaneous writer, and later it served the basis for *an Italian libretto* by Giacomo Rossi, an Italian poet and librettist.

The plot for A. Hill's libretto scenario is loosely based on the eighteenth canto of T. Tasso's poem "Jerusalem Delivered". The author doesn't fully follow the text of the poem. He uses the key moments of the plot only (Table 1).

A set of characters is added because of changes of some plot lines in libretto. The original characters are Goffredo, Eustazio, Rinaldo, Argante, Armida and sirens. Additional characters are Almirena, a Christian magician, a woman and Araldo. These can be divided into three groups:

- *Historic and legendary characters* – Goffredo, Eustazio, Rinaldo, sirens.
- *Feature characters introduced in the poem by Tasso* – Armida, Argante.
- *Feature characters introduced in the libretto* – Almirena, a Christian magician, a woman and sirens, Araldo.

Besides, the opera libretto displays the change of some Tasso's poem characters and substitution of their functions:

1. In Tasso's poem it is Peter who blesses Rinaldo before the crusade. In the libretto this function is fulfilled by Almirena.
2. It is known that there is no such a character as a Christian magician in the poem. There are archangels Gabriel and Michael in it. A Christian magician is likely to substitute these biblical characters.

The message of the opera "Rinaldo" is the fight between good and evil in which forces of good finally win. The image-bearing sphere of good (light) embraces the characters that uphold the Christianity and fight for its ideals. The characters of the image-bearing sphere of evil (darkness) profess the Muslim religion. They are helped by the magic forces. The image-bearing structure of the opera "Rinaldo" can be presented in the following scheme (Fig. 1)

Thus, antagonism of forces of action and forces of counter-action is embodied in the opposition of two camps. This becomes the mainspring of the development of the action inspired by a religious idea of Jerusalem liberation from the infidels.

The analysis of the plot composition of the libretto of the opera "Rinaldo" enables to reveal the similarity of the motifs chosen by A. Hill with those in librettos of Italian operas composed at the turn of XVII – XVIII centuries.

It should be pointed out that Christian epos and historic plots were extremely popular with the librettists at the close of the first third of the XVII century. Old Roman and modern Spanish comedies of "a cloak and a sword"<sup>1</sup> bring some variety into the baroque libretto. By the second half of the XVII century Italian libretto integrates different plots and themes: history and myth, fiction and real political events, the comic, the lyric and the tragic.

Table 1

Act in the opera, scene	The relevant fragment in the poem
Act I, scene 1	<p>Verse 2:            Low as he kneeled before him Godfrey cast            His arms around his neck, and kindly said;            “No more revive the melancholy past;            In peace repose the memory of the dead!            And no amends I seek for frenzy fled,            Than that thy wonted valour be renewed,-            That for the ruin of the foe, thou tread            Enchanted ground, and, for the general good,            From the spells and monsters free the’ inviolable            wood.</p>
Act II, scene 1	<p>Verses 18–19:            He passes onward – the charm works; a sound            Sweet as the air of Paradise upsprings;            Hoarse roars the shallow brook; leaves around;            Sigh to the fluttering of the light wind’s wings;            Her ravishing swing dirge the cygnet sings,            Loud mourn the answering nightingales; sad shells,            Flutes, human voices tuned to golden strings,            And the loud searching organ’s glorious swells,-            Such and so various sounds one single sound expels.            He was expecting, like the rest, to meet            The strange wild groans and thunders of dismay,            And lo, a symphony of sirens sweet,            Birds, winds, and waters, for his pleasure play!...</p>
Act II, scene 5	<p>Verse 30:            A rude Silenus oft the days of old            Have seen unclose, and yield some Goddess fair,            But never yet did sylvan image hold            Charms such as issued from the myrtle rare:            For forth a Lady stept with golden hair,            With angel beauty, angel mien and grace;            In whom, albeit of visionary air,            Rinaldo starts Armida’s forms to trace,            The same expressive eye, fond smile, and radiant face.</p>
Act III, scene 3 (final fragment)	<p>Verse 33:            ...But he, unmoved by all he sees and hears,            Cautious, not cruel, to the plaints she poured            No longer pays regard, but draws his fatal sword.</p>
Act III, scene 9	<p>Verse 40:            With glad huzzas for victory achieved            Rang the wide hills around, and skies above;            The conquering knight by Godfrey is received            With praise unmixed with envy, and with love...</p>

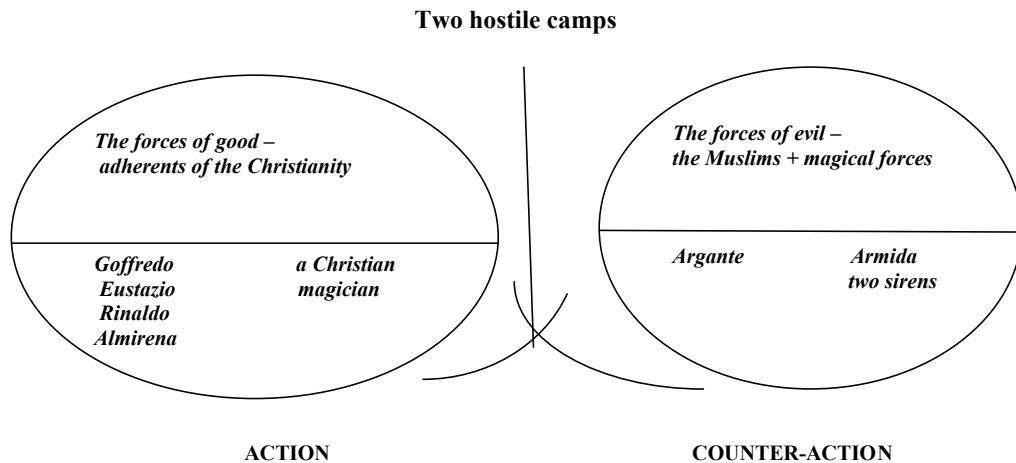


Fig. 1

Turning to historical plots gives birth to the *opera-seria* genre. However, it should be noted that historical theme turns out to be on the periphery of the event narration. A love line becomes a plot making one. This is proved by the analysis of opera librettos composed at the turn of the XVII and XVIII centuries. It enables to single out a set of key motifs for the plot composition (for example, A. Aurelli "Pompey the Great in Cilicia"; S. Stampiglia "The triumph of Camilla, queen of the Volsci"; A. Zeno "Pharamond", A. Salvi "Andromache"). These are *the motif of salvation, the motif of mutual love, the motif of unrequited love, the motif of jealousy, the motif of recollections (dreams) of love, the motif of rendezvous, the motif of suffering, the motif of hatred, the motif of revenge, the motif of duty, the motif of reward, the motif of disguise/ recognition.*

The motifs enumerated above interact in various ways. The priority is obviously given to the plot motifs connected with the theme of love. Besides, a magic dramaturgic line characteristic for baroque opera is pushed aside, the number of characters becomes fewer (up to 6-8 characters), and comic characters are excluded from librettos<sup>2</sup>. It can be supposed that while in Italy Handel

learnt this type of libretto which had the greatest influence on him.

Basing on T. Tasso's poem as the original, A. Hill preserved a set of important components but at the same time shifted a historic perspective, having emphasized a theme of love. The latter differently manifests itself in the opera:

- In Scene 5 of Act I the dialogue between Armida and Argante embodies *the motif of love/partnership*. It is here where the plot starts.
- *The motif of mutual love* between Rinaldo and Almirena is materialized in their mutual duet in Scene 6 of Act I.
- *The motifs of Armida's jealousy and hatred* interacting with *the motif of Argante's unfaithfulness* are brightly presented in Scene 10 of Act II.

It should be also mentioned that *the motif of salvation*, being very important for a historical and heroic dramaturgic line, gets a new perspective switching action to a love sphere: "Almirena's salvation" becomes the condition of "Jerusalem's salvation".

Peculiar features of the plot composition, image-bearing structure, integration of plot motifs and dramaturgic lines characteristic of

"Rinaldo" make it possible to single out several main themes of the libretto:

- *historical and heroic theme* (determined by the literary source);
- *theme of love* (introduced to the libretto);
- *magic theme* (integrates the plot motifs of the primary source with the traditional elements specific for opera conceptions of the baroque era).

The choice of the poem "Jerusalem Delivered" as a primary literary source predetermined the composition's genre type, and namely *historical and heroic opera*. Interaction with the traditions of *English* and *French theatres* at the turn of the XVII-XVIII centuries is seen in it<sup>3</sup>. It is explained by Hill's participation in making an opera version. He couldn't help taking into consideration those national traditions of English and French theatres which were formed and actively interacted in music-and-drama practice.

A. Hill was known in England as a dramatist, the author of 17 plays written for drama theatre. The versions of Voltaire's *Zaire* and *Mérope*, being adaptations, are specifically made special mention of by the researchers. Hill was also fond of satire. One of his most famous satiric pieces was written on Alexander Pope<sup>4</sup>. He was always burning with the desire to stage an opera which would be no worse than Henry Purcell's "Dido and Aeneas" regarding the ideas of the plot, harmony of dramaturgy and staginess.

Hill knew English dramaturgy of the second half of the XVII century very well. Philip Sidney and Benjamin Jonson, John Dryden and William Davenant were among significant personalities. French classical tragedy as well as its ideas and principles, which the developing genre of English heroic drama patterned on, influenced English literature greatly. Its peculiar features are the following ones, if given a brief consideration:

- adherence to drama unity of time, place and action;
- avoiding of mixing the tragic and the comic;
- absence of state problems and focus on the theme of ideal love and valour;
- didactic importance of the plot, aiming at verisimilitude;
- one-sided outlining of characters, their sharp subdivision into positive and negative ones.

Practically all these features can be traced in the libretto "Rinaldo" that proves the influence of English heroic drama on making a scenario plan.

A magic dramaturgic line with a set of typical motifs of the plot (for example, *transformations*) doesn't fit into the traditional outline of Italian libretto. On the one hand, its introduction is explained by the inclination for spectacular effects accompanied with a magnificent theatre set peculiar for baroque theatre. At the same time magic scenes are characteristic to both French and English theatres, and the latter had actively interacted with strong folkloric traditions since the period of Elizabethan drama. The origins trace back to medieval court pantomimes. Later they flourished as the practice of staging spectacular performances ("The masque") at the English court.

Interesting conclusions are drawn at the comparison of the plot motifs of the libretto of the opera "Rinaldo" with specific features of a fairy-tale introduced by Vladimir Propp in "Morphology of the Fairy-tale" (Propp 1998). The researcher points out that all fairy-tales are similar in their structure. He singles out thirty one functions the fairy-tale takes to present the action development. Undoubtedly, all these functions and patterns do not show themselves in "Rinaldo" to the full. Hence, there are some interesting parallels between the opera and fairy-tales. For example:

1. Each *fairy-tale starts with the temporal space identification* ("once upon a time in a faraway kingdom") and either introduction or enumeration of family members. Act I of the libretto "Rinaldo" starts with the scene in which Goffredo, Almirena, Eustazio and Rinaldo (the main character), surrounded by the guards, are laying siege to Jerusalem.

2. In any fairy-tale *the main hero must undergo some trials and be rewarded thereafter*. In the libretto Rinaldo declares his love for a tribal chief's daughter. Goffredo agrees that his daughter Almirena will be his bride but only when Zion falls. Thus, Rinaldo must fight with Goffredo's army boldly and assure victory. But as the scenario of the libretto introduces Almirena's abduction by Armida Rinaldo's motivation "to get the reward" becomes stronger.

3. "*The antagonist's emergence*". The fairy-tale presupposes the description or the emergence of the negative hero who is struggled against. As for "Rinaldo", these are Argante's arrival at Goffredo in order to conclude a treaty, on the one hand, and the arrival of Armida who will abduct Rinaldo's beloved, on the other hand. There are all three plot lines here: a historical line in the first case; magic and love lines (the moments of collision in historic and love themes) in the second case.

4. Almirena's abduction in Rinaldo's presence can be regarded as one of the variants similar to such a plot development in the fairy-tale as "*The antagonist does harm or damage to one of the family members*".

5. The fairy-tale's compositional function ("*The seeker hero agrees or makes up his mind to react*") is usually expressed by a typical phrase "Let us find your princesses". In scenes 8 and 9 of the opera's Act I Rinaldo (*a seeker hero*) is about to search for his beloved. At this situation a new character that helps to solve the task (*Baba-Yaga, a witch, a magician, etc.*) is introduced in

the fairy-tale. In "Rinaldo" such a character as a Christian magician is mentioned. The magician has got a magic crosier that can destroy Armida's evil spell.

6. "*A magic object gets to a hero's disposal*". In the opera Goffredo and Eustazio get a Christian magician's magic crosier after the latter has destroyed Armida's bewitched castle. They destroy a magic garden with it. Despite the fact that it was not the main hero (Rinaldo) who made use of a magic crosier there is still the fact of "getting a magic object into disposal". This is the parallel with fairy-tales.

7. "*A hero is carried, brought, led to the location of the object which is needed and searched for and is usually in a different kingdom*". In scene 3 of Act II Rinaldo gets into a boat, surrounded by the sirens, with a woman in it. They deliver Rinaldo to a magic island. In scene 6 two spirits bring the hero to Armida who holds Almirena captive.

8. "*The hero and the antagonist enter a straightforward struggle*". In scene 4 of Act III after Armida's attempt to kill Almirena Rinaldo fights with her. In "Battaglia" and scene 10 the scenes of the battle of the crusaders' army and Argante's army are portrayed.

9. *In the fairy-tale the antagonist can be shot, expatriated, "tied to a horse's tail", he can commit suicide, etc.* There can be also the variant of "*a magnanimous forgiveness*". In the end of the opera "Rinaldo" the opponents, Armida and Argante, convert to Christianity. The final scene is the parties' reconciliation.

10. "*The hero gets married and ascends the throne*". In the opera's libretto there are no wedding scenes but scene 7 of Act III shows the reunion of the beloved, Rinaldo and Almirena.

Having drawn the parallels with the structure of the fairy-tale's composition, it can be argued that there are quite many things in common between the libretto "Rinaldo" and this

	Act I									Act II										Act III										
number of a scene	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	10-13
a plot line																														
Historical and heroic																														
Love																														
Magic																														

Fig. 2

literary genre. They give grounds to state that that the peculiar features of such a literary genre as a fairy-tale has influenced Hill's scenario for Handel's opera.

Summing up the mentioned above, it is worth while presenting the interaction of main dramaturgic lines in the opera "Rinaldo" in the form of a scheme that vividly demonstrates the priority of a love line in the plot composition as well as its correlation with other dramaturgic lines (Fig. 2).

Thus, a short analysis of the plot composition of the opera "Rinaldo" enables to conclude that the text of the libretto demonstrates *the organic interaction of different national traditions of opera practice at the turn of the XVII-XVIII centuries: Italian, French and English*. It is probably one of the factors (along with G. Handel's great music) that led to its success during Handel's lifetime (after the premiere season a set of performances in their new versions was staged) and ensured its great significance for modern theatrical art.

<sup>1</sup> One of such examples is Rospigliosi's "Heavenly pretender" based on Luis Vélez de Guevara, Antonio Coelho and Francisco de Rojas Zorilla's "Balthazara comedy" published in Madrid in 1652.

<sup>2</sup> This is explained by the influence of one of the leading principles of classical drama – the principle of non-blending of genres.

<sup>3</sup> Interesting information about the history and traditions of French theatre can be derived from A.N. Kushnerevich's article "Kultura i iskusstvo Frantsii. Programma-prospekt spetsseminara" [French culture and art. A prospectus programme of a special seminar] (Kushnerevich 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Pope (1688-1744) is an English poet, reformer of English poetic prosodies (heroic couplets). He translated Homer's "Iliad" into English in iambic pentameter. Besides, he was one of those who translated "Odyssey". Pope is the author of philosophic ("Moral Essays", "The Essay on Man"), satirical ("The Dunciad") and ironically comic ("The Rape of the Lock") poems.

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## Специфика сюжетосложения оперы

### Г.Ф. Генделя «Ринальдо»

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*Статья посвящена одной из первых опер, которая принесла Г.Ф. Генделю европейский успех – «Ринальдо». По общему мнению исследователей, она считается одним из лучших достижений композитора. Тем не менее, в русскоязычной литературе об этом сочинении можно обнаружить информацию лишь самого общего характера. На фоне ренессанса барочной оперы в сценической практике XX века исследовательский интерес к музыкальному театру этого периода, в том числе и к оперному творчеству Генделя, значительно активизировался. Пришло время привлечь внимание к шедевру 26-летнего немецкого гения. В рамках данной статьи предпринята попытка систематизации имеющихся сведений, связанных с историей создания оперы Генделя; выявления специфики трактовки литературного первоисточника в сценарии А. Хилла и либретто Дж. Росси; определения особенностей сюжетосложения на примере анализа либретто и рассмотрения его в контексте театральных традиций конца XVII – начала XVIII века.*

*Ключевые слова: театр, барокко, опера, Г. Гендель, либретто, А. Хилл, Дж. Росси, сюжетосложение.*

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