

THE BIBLICAL STORY OF THE CREATION OF EARTH AND THE FALL OF MAN IN MUSIC – A FEW WORKS, MANY OBSERVATIONS

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***Summary.** The biblical story of the creation of earth and Man, the fates of Adam and Eve – their love, the fall, the expulsion from Eden and its consequences – throughout many centuries inspired philosophers, writers, painters as well as composers who in their writings and works of art presented various interpretations of the subject. One of the undoubtedly most famous illustrations of the history of Man, described in the Book of Genesis fundamental for the Judeo-Christian tradition, was created by an English poet, John Milton in his epic poem, Paradise Lost. The central theme constitutes the sin of the first humans. However, apart from the biblical story of Adam and Eve, the poem also presents events that took place before and after the first man appeared, such as the description of the creation of the world and its visions after the fall of mankind – the crime of Cain, the plague, war and the deluge, the story of Abraham as well as the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The multiplicity of plots and the beautiful language of Puritan poetry inspired many composers to supplement its semantic level with an expression of suggestive music. The proposed text shall be a short overview of the biblical story of Man from the perspective of the English writer who in turn inspired more composers – from John Christopher Smith, Galliard, Haydn and Rubinstein to Krzysztof Penderecki – also in the context the re-interpretation of the subject by Kagel's, Stockhausen's and Nowak's compositions.*

Keywords: contemporary musical theatre, Garden of Eden, Milton, Haydn, Rubinstein, Penderecki, Kagel, Stockhausen, Nowak.

Introduction

The history of Man, from his creation until the moment of his expulsion from Paradise, is described in the Bible in the initial four chapters of the First Book of Moses – the Book of Genesis which contains the symbolic answer to the difficult questions pervading humanity from the dawn of time: how the world and Man were created, where evil and good originate from and what the purpose of human life is. The history of creation also tells of the struggle of two powerful forces: Good and Evil symbolised by God and Satan. And thus, next to the characters of the first humans in the description of Genesis, there is also God and selected Archangels as well as Satan, who in the shape of a serpent, leads men to their fall.

The Biblical story of the creation of the world and Man has inspired philosophers, writers, painters and composers for many centuries. In tractates and works of art they presented various interpretations of the subject. English poet John Milton is the author of one of the most famous literary interpretations of the subject, which he presented in the epic *Paradise Lost*¹.

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* mainly represents the genre of an epic poem, although it contains also some qualities of related genres. According to the rules of the epos genre, Milton describes the history of creation and fall of the first humans with an epic distance in a broad context of proceeding as well as the apocalyptic vision of the end of the world. He also presents numerous references in the context of England's political situation of those days. This is typical of a digressive poem in which the narrative themes interweave with the author's digressions.² Apart from the plot, *Paradise Lost* contains the author's deliberations on the nature of Man and the origin of good and evil as in a philosophical poem.³ Milton creates two opposing worlds – that of God and of Satan personifying receptively the idea of good and evil, love and hate, creation and destruction. The third world existing between these two – that of Man – is the plain upon which two forces collide. In Milton's work, the characters of God, Satan, Adam and Eve are presented as *dramatis personae*, the biblical author's literary statement is transformed into poetic language typical of the literary genre of the epic poem.

Musical interpretation

Paradise Lost inspired a few composers. The most famous classical oratory whose libretto was partially based on Milton's epic poem is of course *The Creation* by Joseph Haydn. The libretto's author Thomas Linley based his text on three sources: the Book of Genesis, the Biblical psalms as well as books VII and VIII of Milton's epic poem.

1 First edition in 1667, second extended edition in 1674.

2 Hill, Ch. Milton and the English Revolution. Faber & Faber, London Boston, 1979, p. 354.

3 Chłopicka, R. Raj utracony – koncepcja tekstu a język muzyczny, in: Współczesność i tradycja w muzyce Krzysztofa Pendereckiego, Krakow, 1983, p. 234.

Since Haydn was not fluent in English, he asked Baron Gottfried van Swieten for a German translation. In the opinion of linguists of those times, the baron also did not know English perfectly so his translation was quite free. At the same time he left several fragments for the composer's own interpretation.

The subject chosen by Haydn was also interpreted in the music of other less known composers: John Ernest Galliard, the author of *The Morning Hymn of Adam and Eve*, for two sopranos and *basso continuo*, in which the composer only refers to fragments from Book V of the epic poem (lines 153-208) and John Christopher Smith, a late-Baroque British composer, a student of Georg Friedrich Händel. The libretto to his oratorio of *Paradise Lost*, which was written by Benjamin Stillingfleet, uses six books of Milton's epic poem (out of twelve) – IV, V, IX, X, XI, and XII. They constitute the description of the history of Man.⁴ The author omitted the controversial theme of Satan, apart from those places in the plot where his presence is related to the actions of the first humans in the garden of Eden.

Anton Rubinstein referred to John Milton's epic poem in the age of Romanticism. Influenced by Händel's *Israel in Egypt* and Haydn's *The Creation*, in 1855 he composed a three-act oratorio – or as he described it “spiritual opera” – *Das verlorene Paradies*.⁵ The libretto written by a German author, Arnold Schlönbach refers to three first books of Milton's epic poem, whose contents focuses on the history of the fallen angels.

Particular attention, among musical interpretations of the history of creation – the one deriving from the source, i.e. the Bible, the Miltonian one and finally transformed by authors and captured into new contexts of symbolical functions, should be paid to four musical stage works: *The Paradise Lost* by Krzysztof Penderecki, *Die Erschöpfung der Welt* (The Exhaustion [or De-creation] of the World) by Mauricio Kagel, the *Licht (Light)* heptalogy by Karlheinz Stockhausen, and *Space Opera* by Aleksander Nowak – and with them four artistic attitudes: the traditional, the postmodernist, religiously syncretic and the futuristic/neoromantic one.

Krzysztof Penderecki wrote *Paradise Lost* between 1975-1978. The Lyric Opera of Chicago commissioned it for the American bicentennial. The *sacra rappresentazione* includes two acts – each preceded by a prologue. The acts are divided into one- or multi-part scenes. Just as in Milton's poem, Penderecki's composition is dominated initially by the principle of a successive contrasting juxtaposition of scenes connected with the world of God and Satan. Later on these worlds sometimes permeate and overlap each other, resulting in an increase of dramatic tension.

In Milton's poem the main theme is the battle between the world of Good and Evil, and Man becomes their tool, whereas Penderecki's work transfers the emphasis onto the world of Man. Thus, the composer foregoes the presentation of many events vividly shown by Milton: the description of the creation of the world, the war in Heaven and casting the rebellious angels into the abyss as well as future events, such as: the acts of Abraham, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the mission of the Church. In

4 Smither, H.E. A History of the Oratorio, vol. 3 The Oratorio In Classical Era, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987, p. 245-257

5 Taylor, Ph. S. Anton Rubinstein: A Life in Music, Indiana University Press, 2007, p. 49.

respect to Milton's work, Penderecki also changes the sequence of presenting characters. The poet begins his action with the scene of lamenting fallen angels, whereas the composer opens his work with almost the final scene, i.e. the lament of Adam and Eve after their fall. From the point of view of the contents, the key scene in Penderecki's *Paradise Lost* is the moment the Messiah sacrifices his life for Man (from the point of view of music it is a quite developed scene of apocalyptic visions of the world's future). The whole composition is concluded with a pure D-major chord. "The major chord continues to be the fullest of all chords for me. It's just that nobody is able to come up with anything else. I don't believe that anybody could possibly discover a more pure and crowning chord than major triad, a third or unison. That's why these harmonies continue to appear in my music", the composer confesses.⁶

Mauricio Kagel, referred to as "an unrivalled musical polemist"⁷, "took a liking to arguing with the authors of the past and perversely disputes with the stylistic conventions, willingly practicing dialectic sound acrobatics and juggles erudite references to the aesthetics of all ages and cultures."⁸ His opera *Die Erschöpfung der Welt* (subtitled: *Szenische Illusion in einem Aufzug* [The Stage Illusion in an Elevator]), written in 1974-1976, is an exceptionally pessimistic theatrical vision and at the same time one of the funniest plays that were created for an opera theatre. The plot, based upon the myth of the creation of the world, diverges from the original version, being closer to its exhaustion, wearing down, as described in the title (*The Exhaustion of the World*). It is an alternative story in which the world is a failed prank of a drunken God. The first humans are more similar to shapeless monsters, and so are other animals. Apart from humans, God also brings to life a choir of his flatterers. Musical art is created during mating activities. Mankind seems to be focused on procreation and satisfying their own appetites. Finally, a slightly terrified God sends "salvation" to earth – a huge meat grinder which devours the unsuccessful freaks. A music theme straight from a fascist rally sounds from the speakers during this scene followed by peaceful sounds of nature. A vulture comes flying at the end and surprised, utters the word *Amen*? in the form of a cynical question.

"Since I was able to think I have been grateful to God for my life, His protection, my talent, for the example of His nature", Karlheinz Stockhausen admitted in 1997. During the musical courses in August 2005 he added: "I have not changed much, I have always tried to praise God with my compositions."⁹ The aforementioned tendency realised in a gigantic life project of the famous *enfant terrible* of the 20th-century art. His heptalogy *Light. Seven Days of the Week*, with all its complexities, contradictions, aesthetic dilemmas and finally with the multi-dimensional message perceptually involving more than one sense, deserves an interpretation also from the point of view of its protagonists:

6 *Konwersatorium na temat niedokończonych opery Krzysztofa Pendereckiego "Raj utracony" wg Miltona*, in: L. Polony (ed.), *Muzyka w kontekście kultury. Spotkania muzyczne w Baranowie*, 1 (1976), PWM, Krakow 1978, p. 65

7 Cichy, D. *Opus non gratum? Na marginesie Sankt-Bach-Passion*. In: *Res Facta Nova*, No. 9 (18), 2007.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Stockhausen, K. A speech closing the 8th Summer Courses, Kürten 2005.

the personification of pride and the material world – Lucifer, the symbol of intuition – Eve, and finally the supreme being, God’s incarnation on Earth – Michael. Let us look at Eve! She is a synthesis of the traditional Biblical image of the first woman, mother to all humankind with the image’s interpretation in *The Urantia Book*. Here Eve shares the fate with the Mother of God, Mary; she is also sometimes mysterious, unavailable, an almost cosmic super-woman, the object of Michael’s desires. Just as in the Old Testament Book of Genesis, also in Stockhausen’s cycle, Eve’s destination is on the one hand to give life to mankind, and on the other – responsibility for its fall, for her submission to Satan and the loss of Paradise. The composer confronted this image with his own vision of a woman: mother (also his own), the beloved (Eve’s part is dedicated to his wife – an outstanding clarinettist and bass clarinettist, Suzanne Stevens), a goddess, a demon. He was assisted by the antique images referred to by the names of goddesses of the ancient Egypt – Maat and Isis, Babylonia – Ishtar, India – Devī, or Scandinavia – Freyja.

Yet another approach to the subject of Genesis is presented in *Space Opera* composed in 2015 by Aleksander Nowak, a representative a young generation, which lives and works in Katowice. He invited Georgi Gospodinov to work with him on the opera, a half-generation-older Bulgarian writer whose writing is infused with existential dilemmas and the fascination with the complex human nature. The libretto’s author selects the motif of Adam and Eve from the Biblical story, presenting it, however, in a slightly different context.

The subject of Nowak’s opera is the first mission to Mars (inspired by a true story – the plans for organising the Mars One mission, whose objective was the probable colonisation of the Red Planet). *Space Opera* tells a story of a married couple (Adam and Eve), who set out together on a journey which appears to be a test for their relationship. During this 500-day mission a conflict arises which reveals completely different priorities of the two heroes – different expectations towards life and the other person. Adam wants at all costs to fulfil his childhood dreams of setting the first foot onto an unknown space. Eve desires closeness and a normal family. Contrary to her own convictions, she decides to participate in the mission, which is her husband’s dream – she does this in the name of love and she wants to “be happy for him”. Whereas he is willing to absolutely give up their privacy and agrees to the installation of a hidden camera in their cabin and a television broadcast in the form of *reality show*, supervised by an insolent Producer – a specific personification of the Devil. Eventually the mission brings fulfilment to both of them – Eve returns home pregnant, whereas Adam changes his priorities.

It is interesting that this human story is intertwined with yet another, seemingly lighter insect motif, because on board of the ship there is a stowaway who found its way there not quite by accident... a fly! The purpose of this character’s existence in the story may be interpreted in different ways – from the role of an alert observer to a symbol of guilty conscience. The importance of this character is already visible in the prologue to the opera, in which a choir of fruit flies paraphrases the Biblical Book of Genesis: “At the beginning there was a fly... At the beginning there was a regular fruit fly”.

Conclusions

The aforementioned works discuss the subjects of a journey, life, joy and pain, punishment and death. These are well-known subject matters but here they have been presented in a different interpretation. Using the classification of Gerard Genette¹⁰ these works may be considered as a hypertext (a later text) of an earlier text (hypotext) – the epic poem by Milton's or Gospodinov's vision, which in turn are after all a hypertext to the book of all times – the Bible, considered by Bruno Schulz to be an achetext¹¹. Thus following Genette's concept they may be considered not as much as inter- but rather hypertextual, a specific kind of mythology offering the listener keys to the spiritual possibilities of human perception. Thus authors fulfil their artistic mission, which is ascribed to them by an American anthropologist, Joseph Campbell: "myths have to be kept alive. The people that are capable of that are all types of artists, and the author's function is the mythologisation of the surroundings and the world."¹²

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10 Compare Genette, G. Palimpsesty. Literatura drugiego stopnia. In: *Współczesna teoria badań literackich za granic. Antologia*. Ed. H. Markiewicz, Vol. 4, Part 2, Krakow, 1992.

11 Compare Kasperski, E. Związki literackie, intertekstualność i literatura powszechna. In: *Teoria literatury w sytuacji ponowoczesności*. Warsaw, 1996.

12 Campbell, J. Potęga mitu. Wydawnictwo KR, Warsaw, 2004. Joseph Campbell, *Potęga mitu*. Wydawnictwo KR, Warsaw 2004, p. 105.

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Santrauka. *Biblijos istorijos apie pasaulio ir žmogaus sutvėrimą, apie Adomo ir Ievos lemtį – jų meilę, nuopolį, ištrėmimą iš Edeno sodų ir pasekmes – ištikus šimtmečius liko įkvėpimo šaltiniu filosofams, rašytojams, tapytojams ir kompozitoriams, kurie savo tekstuose ir meno kūrinuose pateikdavo įvairių istorijų interpretacijų. Vieną žymiausių žmogaus kilmės istorijų, įrašytą į Šv. Rašto Genezės knygą, formuojančią judeo-krikščionišką tradiciją, interpretacijų randame anglų poeto Johno Miltono epinėje poemoje „Prarastasis rojus“. Esminė jos tema – pirmųjų žmonių nuodėmė. Tačiau be pačios Adomo ir Ievos istorijos poemoje aprašoma, kas vyko iki ir po to, kai atsirado pirmasis žmogus; tai – pasaulio tvėrimo vaizdai ir pasaulio vizija įvykus žmonijos nuopoliui – Kaino nuodėmė, maras, karas ir tvanas, Abraomo istorija bei Jėzaus Kristaus gyvenimas, mirtis ir prisikėlimas. Siužetų gausa bei puritoniškosios poetinės kalbos grožis įkvėpė daugelį kompozitorių, siekiančių praturtinti semantinius sluoksnius savo sugestyvinėmis muzikinėmis interpretacijomis. Pateiktame tekste trumpai žvilgtelima į biblinę žmogaus istoriją iš anglų rašytojo perspektyvos, kuri vėliau įkvėpė daug kompozitorių: nuo Johno Christopherio Smitho iki Galliardo, Haydno, Rubinsteino ir Krzystofo Pendereckio. Taip pat siekiama naujai interpretuoti Kagelio, Stockhauseno ir Nowako kūrinius.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *šiuolaikinis muzikinis teatras, Edeno sodas, Miltonas, Haydnas, Rubinsteinas, Pendereckis, Kagelis, Stockhausenas, Nowakas.*

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