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Mercy and its Transformations

Usmiljenje in njegove transformacije

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IZVLEČEK

ABSTRACT

Daleč od tega, da bi izžarevala dostojanstvo strogih, a usmiljenih vladarjev v zgodnjih Mozartovih operah, Titova dejanja kažejo poteze histeričnega samoinsceniranja. Lažnivost njegovega položaja odseva v sami glasbi, ki – kot vrhunski vzorec mozartovske ironije – spodkopava eksplicitno ideološki projekt opere.

Far from radiating the dignity of the severe but merciful rulers of Mozart's early operas, Tito's acts display features of hysterical self-staging. The falsity of his position is rendered by the music itself, which, in a supreme display of Mozartean irony, undermines the opera's explicit ideological project.

It is a very rare case that a (relatively) unpopular work like Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* plays such a crucial structural role in the history of music. As we shall see, what makes it unpopular is not its archaic character, but, on the contrary, its uncanny contemporaneity: it directly addresses some of the key issues of our time.

Clemenza has to be put in the series which characterizes opera from the very beginning: Why was the story of Orpheus *the* opera topic in the first century of its history, when there are almost one hundred recorded versions of it? The figure of Orpheus asking the gods to bring him back his Euridice stands for an intersubjective constellation which provides as it were the elementary matrix of opera, more precisely, of the operatic aria: the relationship of the subject (in both senses of the term: autonomous agent as well as the subject of legal power) to his Master (Divinity, King, or the Lady of courtly love/*die Minne*/) is revealed through the hero's song (the counterpoint to the collectivity embodied in the chorus), which is basically a supplication addressed to the Master, a call

to him to show mercy, to make an exception, or otherwise forgive the hero his trespass. The first, rudimentary, form of subjectivity is this voice of the subject beseeching the Master to suspend, for a brief moment, his own Law. A dramatic tension in subjectivity arises from the ambiguity between power and impotence that pertains to the gesture of grace by means of which the Master answers the subject's entreaty.

As to the official ideology, grace expresses the Master's supreme power, the power to rise above one's own law: only a really powerful Master can afford to distribute mercy. What we have here is a kind of symbolic exchange between the human subject and his divine Master: when the subject, the human mortal, by way of his offer of self-sacrifice, surmounts his finitude and attains the divine heights, the Master responds with the sublime gesture of Grace, the ultimate proof of *his* humanity. Yet this act of grace is at the same time branded by the irreducible mark of a forced empty gesture: the Master ultimately makes a virtue out of necessity, in that he promotes as a free act what he is in any case compelled to do – if he refuses clemency, he takes the risk that the subject's respectful entreaty will turn into open rebellion.

Crucial here is the move from Monteverdi's *Orfeo* to Gluck's *Orpheus und Euridice*: what Gluck contributed was a new form of subjectivization. In Monteverdi we have sublimation in its purest: after Orpheus turns around to cast a glance at Euridice and thus loses her, the Divinity consoles him – true, he has lost her as a flesh-and-blood person, but from now on, he will be able to discern her beautiful features everywhere, in the stars in the sky, in the glistening of the morning dew... Orpheus is quick to accept the narcissistic profit of this reversal: he becomes enraptured with the poetic glorification of Euridice that lies ahead of him – to put it succinctly, he no longer loves *her*, what he loves is the vision of *himself* displaying his love for her.

This, of course, throws another light on the eternal question of why Orpheus looked back and thus screwed things up. What we encounter here is simply the link between the death-drive and creative sublimation: Orpheus' backward gaze is a perverse act *stricto sensu*; he loses Euridice intentionally in order to regain her as the object of sublime poetic inspiration (this idea was developed by Klaus Theweleit¹). But should one not go here even a step further? What if Euridice herself, aware of the impasse of her beloved Orpheus, intentionally provoked his turning around? What if her reasoning was something like: 'I know he loves me, but he is potentially a great poet, this is his fate, and he cannot fulfill that promise by being happily married to me – so the only ethical thing for me to do is to sacrifice myself, to provoke him into turning around and losing me, so that he will be able to become the great poet he deserves to be' – and then she starts gently coughing or something similar to attract his attention...

Examples here are innumerable: like Euridice who, by sacrificing herself, i.e. by intentionally provoking Orpheus into turning his gaze towards her and thus sending her back to Hades, delivers his creativity and sets him free to pursue his poetic mission, Elsa in Wagner's *Lohengrin* also intentionally asks the fateful question and thereby delivers Lohengrin whose true desire, of course, is to remain the lone artist sublimating his suffering into his creativity. Wagner's Brunnhilde, this 'suffering, self-sacrificing

¹ See Klaus Theweleit, *Buch der Könige, Band I: Orpheus und Euridice*, Frankfurt: Stroemfeld und Roter Stern 1992.

woman,' is the ultimate example here: she wills her annihilation, but not as a desperate means to compensate for her guilt – she wills it as an act of love destined to redeem the beloved man, or, as Wagner himself put it in a famous letter to Franz Liszt: 'The love of a tender woman has made me happy; she dared to throw herself into a sea of suffering and agony so that she should be able to say to me 'I love you!' No one who does not know all her tenderness can judge how much she had to suffer. We were spared nothing – but as a consequence I am redeemed and she is blessedly happy because she is aware of it.' Once again, we should descend here from the mythic heights into everyday bourgeois reality: woman is aware of the fact that, by means of her suffering which remains invisible to the public eye, of her renunciation for the beloved man and/or her renunciation to him (the two are always dialectically interconnected, since, in the fantasmatic logic of the Western ideology of love, it is for the sake of her man that the woman must renounce him), she rendered possible man's redemption, his public social triumph – like Traviata who abandons her lover and thus enables his reintegration into the social order.

With Gluck, however, the denouement is completely different: after looking back and thus losing Euridice, Orpheus sings his famous aria 'Che farò senza Euridice,' announcing his intention to kill himself. At this precise point of total self-abandonment, the goddess of Love intervenes and gives him back his Euridice. This specific form of subjectivization – the intervention of Grace not as a simple answer to the subject's entreaty, but as an answer which occurs in the very moment when the subject decides to put his life at stake, to risk everything – is the twist added by Gluck. What is crucial here is the link between the assertion of subjective autonomy and the 'answer of the Real,' the mercy shown by the big Other: far from being opposed, they rely on each other. The modern subject can assert its radical autonomy only insofar as it can count on the support of the 'big Other,' only insofar as his autonomy is sustained by the social substance. No wonder this gesture of 'autonomy and mercy,'² of mercy intervening at the very point of the subject's assertion of full autonomy, is discernible throughout the history of the opera, from Mozart to Wagner: in *Idomeneo* and *Seraglio*, the Other (Neptun, Bassa Selim) displays mercy at the very moment when the hero is ready to sacrifice his/her life, and the same even happens twice in *Zauberflöte* (the magic intervention of the Other prevents both Pamina's and Papageno's suicide); in *Fidelio*, the trumpet announces the Minister's arrival at the very point when Leonora puts her life at stake to save Florestan; up to Wagner's *Parsifal* in which Parsifal himself intervenes and redeems Amfortas precisely when Amfortas asks to be stabbed to death by his knights.

What occurs between Monteverdi and Gluck is thus the *failure of sublimation*: the subject is no longer ready to accept the metaphoric substitution, to exchange 'being for meaning,' i.e., the flesh-and-blood presence of the beloved for the fact that he will be able to see her everywhere, in the stars and the moon, etc. – rather than do this, he prefers to take his life, to lose it all, and it is at this point, to fill in the refusal of sublimation, of its metaphoric exchange, that mercy has to intervene to prevent a total catastrophe. And we live in the shadow of this failed sublimation till today.

² See Ivan Nagel's outstanding *Autonomy and Mercy*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1991.

In Mozart's work, the key moment in this process of the failure of sublimation is *Così fan tutte*. What makes *Così* the most perplexing, traumatic even, among Mozart's operas is the very absurdity of its content: for our psychological sensitivity, it is almost impossible to 'suspend our disbelief' and accept the premise that the two women do not recognize their own lovers in the two Albanian officers. No wonder, then, that, throughout the nineteenth century, the opera was performed in a changed version in order to render the story credible. There were three main versions of these changes which fit perfectly the main modes of the Freudian negation of a certain traumatic content: (1) the staging implied that the two women knew the true identity of the 'Albanian officers' all the time – they just pretended not to know it in order to teach their lovers a lesson; (2) the couples reunited at the end are not the same as at the beginning, they change their places diagonally, so that, through the confusion of identities, the true, natural love links established; (3) most radically, only the music was used, with a wholly new libretto telling a totally different story.

Edward Said drew attention to Mozart's letter to his wife Constanze from 30 September 1790, i.e. from the time when he was composing *Così*; after expressing his pleasure at the prospect of seeing her again soon, he goes on: 'If the people were to be able to see into my heart, I would have to be almost ashamed of myself...' At this point, as Said perspicuously perceives, one would expect the confession of some dirty private secret (sexual fantasies of what he will do to his wife when they will finally meet, etc.); however, the letter goes on: 'everything is cold to me – cold like ice.'³ It is here that Mozart enters the uncanny domain of 'Kant avec Sade,' the domain in which sexuality loses its passionate, intense character and turns into its opposite, a 'mechanical' exercise in pleasure executed by cold distance, like the Kantian ethical subject doing his duty without any pathological commitment... Isn't this the underlying vision of *Così*: a universe in which subjects are determined not by their passionate engagements, but by a blind mechanism that regulates their passions? What compels us to bring *Così* close to the domain of 'Kant avec Sade' is its very insistence on the universal dimension already indicated by its title: 'they are ALL doing like this,' determined by the same blind mechanism... In short, Alfonso the philosopher who organizes and manipulates the game of changed identities in *Così*, is a version of the figure of the Sadean pedagogue educating his young disciples in the art of debauchery. It is thus oversimplified and inadequate to conceive this coldness as that of 'instrumental reason.'

The traumatic core of *Così* resides in its radical 'mechanical materialism' in the sense of Pascalian advice to non-believers: 'Act as if you believe, kneel down, follow the rite, and belief will come by itself!' *Così* applies the same logic to love: far from being an external expression of the inner feeling of love, love rituals and gestures generate love – so act as if you are in love, follow the procedures, and love will emerge by itself... Apropos of Molière's *Tartuffe*, Henri Bergson emphasized how *Tartuffe* is funny not on account of his hypocrisy, but because he gets caught in his own mask of hypocrisy:

He immersed himself so well into the role of a hypocrite that he played it, as it were, sincerely. This way and only this way he becomes funny. Without this purely material

³ See Edward W. Said, 'Così fan tutte,' in *Lettre internationale* 39 (Winter 1997), p. 69-70.

sincerity, without the attitude and speech which, through the long practice of hypocrisy, became for him a natural way to act, Tartuffe would be simply repulsive.⁴

Bergson's precise expression 'purely material sincerity' fits perfectly with the Althusserian notion of Ideological State Apparatuses, i.e. of the external ritual which materializes ideology: the subject who maintains his distance towards the ritual is unaware of the fact that the ritual already dominates him from within. This 'purely material sincerity' of the external ideological ritual, not the depth of the subject's inner convictions and desires, is the true *locus* of the fantasy which sustains an ideological edifice. Moralists who condemn *Così* for its alleged frivolity thus totally miss the point: *Così* is an *ethical* opera in the strict Kierkegaardian sense of the 'ethical stage.' The ethical stage is defined by the sacrifice of the immediate consumption of life, of our yielding to the fleeting moment, in the name of some higher universal norm. If Mozart's *Don Giovanni* embodies the Aesthetic (as was developed by Kierkegaard himself in his detailed analysis of the opera in *Either/Or*), the lesson of *Così* is ethical – why? The point of *Così* is that the love that unites the two couples at the beginning of the opera is no less 'artificial,' mechanically brought about, than the second falling in love of the sisters with the exchanged partners dressed up as Albanian officers that results from the manipulations of the philosopher Alfonso – in both cases, we are dealing with a mechanism that the subjects follow in a blind, puppet-like way. Therein consists the Hegelian 'negation of negation': first, we perceive the 'artificial' love, the product of Alfonso's manipulations, as opposed to the initial 'authentic' love; then, all of a sudden, we become aware that there is actually no difference between the two – the original love is no less 'artificial' than the second. So, since one love counts as much as the other, the couples can return to their initial marital arrangement. This is what Hegel has in mind when he claims that, in the course of a dialectical process, the immediate starting point proves itself to be something already-mediated, i.e. its own self-negation: in the end, we ascertain that we always-already were what we wanted to become, the only difference being that this 'always-already' changes its modality from In-itself into For-itself. Ethical is in this sense the domain of repetition qua symbolic: if, in the Aesthetic, one endeavors to capture the moment in its uniqueness, in the Ethical a thing only becomes what it is through its repetition.

This perspicuous example compels us to complicate a little bit Pascal's 'Kneel down and you will believe!'; adding an additional twist to it. In the 'normal' cynical functioning of ideology, belief is displaced onto another, onto a 'subject supposed to believe,' so that the true logic is: 'Kneel down and you will thereby *make someone else believe!*' One has to take this literally and even risk a kind of inversion of Pascal's formula: 'You believe too much, too directly? You find your belief too oppressing in its raw immediacy? Then kneel down, act as if you believe, and *you will get rid of your belief* – you will no longer have to believe yourself, your belief will already ex-sist objectified in your act of praying!' That is to say, what if one kneels down and prays not so much to regain one's own belief but, on the opposite, to GET RID of one's belief, of its over-proximity, to acquire a breathing space of a minimal distance towards it? To believe – to believe 'directly,' without the externalizing mediation of a ritual – is a heavy, oppressing, trau-

⁴ Henri Bergson, *An Essay on Laughter*, London: Smith 1937, p. 83.

matic burden, which, through exerting a ritual, one has a chance of transferring it onto an Other... If there is a Freudian ethical injunction, it is that one should have *the courage of one's own convictions*: one should dare to fully assume one's identifications. And exactly the same goes for marriage: the implicit presupposition (or, rather, injunction) of the standard ideology of marriage is that, precisely, there should be no love in it. The Pascalian formula of marriage is therefore not 'You don't love your partner? Then marry him or her, go through the ritual of shared life, and love will emerge by itself!', but, on the contrary: 'Are you too much in love with somebody? Then get married, ritualize your love relationship, in order to cure yourself of the excessive passionate attachment, to replace it with the boring daily custom - and if you cannot resist the passion's temptation, there are extra-marital affairs...'

This insight brings us back to the power of Sellars's staging, enabling us to formulate the difference between the two couples of young lovers and the additional couple Alfonzo-Despina. The first two simply exemplify the Bergsonian 'purely material sincerity': in the great love duets of the Act II of *Così*, the men, of course, hypocritically fake love to test the women; however, in exactly the same way as Tartuffe, they get caught in their own game and 'lie sincerely.' This is what music renders - this sincere lie. However, with Alfonzo and Despina, the situation is more complicated: they enact - through others - the rituals of love for the sake of their own love, but in order to get rid of its direct traumatic burden. Their formula is: 'We love each other too much - so let us stage a superficial love imbroglio of the two couples in order to acquire a distance towards this unbearable burden of our passion...'

What all this implies is that Mozart occupies a very special place between pre-Romantic and Romantic music. In Romanticism, music itself - in its very substantial 'passionate' rendering of emotions, celebrated by Schopenhauer - can not only also lie, but *lies in a fundamental way, as to its formal status itself*. Let us take the supreme example of music as the direct rendering of the subject's immersion into the excessive enjoyment of the 'Night of the World,' Wagner's *Tristan*, in which the music itself seems to perform what words helplessly indicate, the way the amorous couple is inexorably drawn towards the fulfillment of their passion, the 'highest joy (*höchste Lust*)' of their ecstatic self-annihilation - is this, however, the metaphysical 'truth' of the opera, its true ineffable message? Why, then, is this inexorable sliding towards the abyss of annihilation interrupted again and again through the (often ridiculous) intrusion of the fragments of common daily life? Let us take the highest case, that of finale itself: just prior to Brangäne's arrival, the music could have moved straight into the final Transfiguration, two lovers dying embraced - why, then, the rather ridiculous arrival of the second ship which accelerates the slow pace of the action in an almost comic way - in a mere couple of minutes, more events happen than in the entire previous opera (the fight in which Melot and Kurwenal die, etc.) - similar to Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, in which in the last two minutes a whole package of things happen. Is this simply Wagner's dramatic weakness? What one should bear in mind here is that this sudden hectic action does NOT just serve as a temporary postponement to the slow, but unstoppable drift towards the orgasmic self-extinction; this hectic action follows an immanent necessity, it *has* to occur as a brief 'intrusion of reality,' permitting Tristan to stage the final self-obliterating act of Isolde.

Without this unexpected intrusion of reality, Tristan's agony of the *impossibility* to die would drag on indefinitely. The 'truth' does not reside in the passionate drift towards self-annihilation, the opera's fundamental affect, but in the ridiculous narrative accidents/intrusions which interrupt it – again, the big metaphysical affect *lies*.

Catherine Clément was therefore right: one should turn the standard notion of the primacy of music in opera around, the idea that words (libretto) and stage action are just a pretext for the true focus, the music itself, so that the truth is on the side of music, and it is the music which delivers the true emotional stance (say, even if a lover complains and threatens, the music delivers the depth of his/her love which belies the aggressivity or, rather, shows it in its true light). What if the opposite is true – what if the music is here the emotional fantasmatic envelope whose function is to render palpable the bitter pill delivered by the words and action (women getting killed or abandoned, etc.)? One should thus read operas as Freud proposes to read a dream: to treat the basic emotional tone as a lie, a screen obfuscating the true message which is in what happens on the stage. Wagner was wrong when he advised a friend in Bayreuth in the midst of the performance of *The Flying Dutchman*: 'Just close your eyes and enjoy the music.' It is absolutely crucial to bear in mind what goes on on stage, to listen to the words also.

This brings us back to *Tristan*: crucial for *Tristan* is the gap between this opera's 'official ideology' and its subversion through the work's texture itself. This subversion in a way turns around the famous Mozartean irony, where, while the person's words display the stance of cynical frivolity or manipulation, the music renders their authentic feelings: in *Tristan*, the ultimate truth does not reside in the musical message of passionate self-obliterating love-fulfillment, but in the dramatic stage action itself which subverts the passionate immersion into the musical texture. The final shared death of the two lovers abounds in Romantic operas – suffice it to recall the triumphant 'Moriame' insieme' from Bellini's *Norma*; against this background, one should emphasize how in Wagner's *Tristan*, the very opera which elevates this shared death into its explicit ideological goal, this, precisely, is NOT what effectively happens – in music, it is as if the two lovers die together, while in reality, they die one AFTER the other, each immersed in his/her own solipsistic dream.

Along these lines, one should read Isolde's ecstatic death at the end of *Tristan* as the ultimate operatic prosopopeia: Tristan can only die if his death is transposed onto Isolde. When Tristan repeats his claim that death could not destroy their love, Isolde provides the concise formula of their death: 'But this little word 'and'—if it were to be destroyed, how but through the loss of Isolde's own life could Tristan be taken by death?' – in short, it is only in and through her death that he will be able to die. Does then Wagner's *Tristan* not offer a case of the interpassivity of death itself, of the 'subject supposed to die'? Tristan can only die insofar as Isolde experiences the full bliss of the lethal self-obliteration for him, at his place. In other words, what 'really happens' in Act III of *Tristan* is ONLY Tristan's long 'voyage to the bottom of the night' with regard to which Isolde's death is Tristan's own fantasmatic supplement, the delirious construction that enables him to die in peace.

Now we can formulate the uniqueness of Mozartean irony: although, in it, music is already fully autonomized with regard to words, *it does not yet lie*. Mozartean irony is

the unique moment when the truth really 'speaks in music,' when music occupies the position of the Unconscious rendered by Lacan with his famous motto '*Moi la vérité, je parle.*' And it is only today, in our postmodern time, allegedly full of irony and lacking belief, that Mozartean irony reaches its full actuality, confronting us with the embarrassing fact that – not in our interior, but in our acts themselves, in our social practice – we believe much more than we are aware of.

In a first approach, of course, things cannot but appear exactly inverted: does Romanticism not stand for the music which renders in a direct, non-lying, way the emotional core of the human being, i.e., which tells the truth much more directly than words, while the uncanny and disturbing lesson of Mozart's *Così* is precisely that music can lie (for example, although the seduction arias of the two 'Albanians' and the ensuing duets are a fake – they pretend to be madly in love in order to seduce the other's fiancée – the music is absolutely 'convincing' in rendering the emotion of love)? The answer to this counter-argument is that it misses the point of Mozartean irony: of course the individuals think that they just fake to be in love, but their music bears witness to the fact that they 'fake to fake,' that they are not aware how there is more truth in their declarations of love than they are aware of. In Romanticism, on the contrary, the very pretense to render directly the emotional truth is a fake – not because it does not render accurately the individual's emotion, but because this very emotion is in itself already a lie...

Clemenza strengthens even further this Mozartean irony. Giacomo Rossini's great male portraits, the three from *Barbiere* (Figaro's 'Largo il factotum,' Basilio's 'Calumnia,' and Bartolo's 'Un dottor della mia sorte'), plus the father's wishful self-portrait of corruption in *Cenerentola*, enact a mocked self-complaint, where one imagines oneself in a desired position, being bombarded by demands for a favor or service. The subject twice shifts his position: first, he assumes the roles of those who address him, enacting the overwhelming multitude of demands which bombard him; then, he feigns a reaction to it, the state of deep satisfaction in being overwhelmed by demands one cannot fulfill. Let us take the father in *Cenerentola*: he imagines how, when one of his daughters will be married to the Prince, people will turn to him, offering him bribes for a service at the court, and he will react to it first with cunning deliberation, then with fake despair at being bombarded with too many requests... The culminating moment of the archetypal Rossini aria is this unique moment of happiness, of the full assertion of the excess of Life which occurs when the subject is overwhelmed by demands, no longer being able to deal with them. At the highpoint of his 'factotum' aria, Figaro exclaims: 'What a crowd/of the people bombarding me with their demands/ – have mercy, one after the other/*uno per volta, per carità!*', referring therewith to the Kantian experience of the Sublime, in which the subject is bombarded with an excess of data that he is unable to comprehend. And do we not encounter a similar excess in Mozart's *Clemenza* – a similar sublime/ridiculous explosion of mercies? Just before the final pardon, Tito himself is exasperated by the proliferation of treasons which oblige him to proliferate acts of clemency:

The very moment that I absolve one criminal, I discover another. /.../I believe the stars conspire to oblige me, in spite of myself, to become cruel. No: they shall not have this satisfaction. My virtue has already pledged itself to continue the contest.

Let us see, which is more constant, the treachery of others or my mercy. / . . . / Let it be known to Rome that I am the same and that I know all, absolve everyone, and forget everything.

One can almost hear Tito complaining: 'Uno per volta, per carità!' – 'Please, not so fast, one after the other, in the line for mercy!' Living up to his task, Tito forgets everyone, but those whom he pardons are condemned to remember it forever:

SEXTUS: It is true, you pardon me, Emperor; but my heart will not absolve me; it will lament the error until it no longer has memory.

TITUS: The true repentance of which you are capable, is worth more than constant fidelity.

This couplet from the finale blurts out the obscene secret of *Clemenza*: the pardon does not really abolish the debt, it rather makes it infinite – we are forever indebted to the person who pardoned us. No wonder Tito prefers repentance to fidelity: in fidelity to the Master, I follow him out of respect, while in repentance, what attached me to the Master is the infinite indelible guilt. In this, Tito is a thoroughly Christian master.

One usually opposes the Jewish rigorous Justice and the Christian Mercy, the inexplicable gesture of undeserved pardon: we humans were born in sin, we cannot ever repay our debts and redeem ourselves through our own acts – our only salvation lies in God's Mercy, in His supreme sacrifice. In this very gesture of breaking the chain of Justice through the inexplicable act of Mercy, of paying our debts, Christianity imposes on us an even stronger debt: we are forever indebted to Christ, we cannot ever repay him for what he did for us. The Freudian name for such an excessive pressure which we cannot ever remunerate is, of course, *superego*. (One should not forget that the notion of Mercy is strictly correlative to that of Sovereignty: only the bearer of sovereign power can dispense mercy.)

How, then, does Tito fit into the series of Mozart's operas? The entire canon of Mozart's great operas can be read as the deployment of the motif of pardon, of dispensing mercy, in all its variations: the higher power intervenes with mercy in *Idomeneo and Seraglio*; in *Le nozze di Figaro*, the subjects themselves pardon the Count who refuses mercy; etc. In order to grasp properly the place of *Clemenza* in this series, one should read it together with *Zauberflöte*, as its mocking shadowy double: if *Zauberflöte* is mercy at its most sublime, *Clemenza* turns this sublimity into a ridiculous excess. The ridiculous proliferation of mercy in *Clemenza* means that power no longer functions in a normal way, so that it has to be sustained by mercy all the time: if a Master has to show mercy, it means that the law failed, that the legal state machinery is not able to run on its own and needs an incessant intervention from the outside. (One witnessed the same situation in state-socialist regimes: when, in a mythical scene from Soviet hagiography, Stalin takes a walk in the fields, meets a driver there whose tractor broke down, and helps him to repair it with wise advice, what this effectively means is that not even a tractor can function normally in a state-socialist economic chaos.)

The obverse, the truth, of the continuous celebration of the wisdom and mercy displayed by Tito is therefore the fact that Tito as a ruler is a fiasco. Instead of relying on

the support of faithful subjects, he ends up surrounded by sick and tormented people condemned to eternal guilt. This sickness is reflected back into Tito himself: far from radiating the dignity of the severe but merciful rulers from the early Mozart's operas, Tito's acts display features of hysterical self-staging: Tito is *playing himself* all the time, narcissistically fascinated by the faked generosity of his own acts. In short, the passage from Bassa Selim in Seraglio to Tito in *Clemenza* is the passage from the naive to the sentimental. And, as is usual with Mozart, this falsity of Tito's position is rendered by the music itself which, in a supreme display of the much-praised Mozartean irony, effectively undermines the opera's explicit ideological project.

Perhaps, then, the fact that *Clemenza* was composed in the midst of the work on *Zauberflöte* is more than a meaningless coincidence. *Clemenza*, composed to honor the investiture of the conservative Leopold II after the death of the progressive Joseph II, stages the obscene reactionary political reality that underlies the reinvented fake 'magic' of the *Zauberflöte* universe. Back in the 1930s, Max Horkheimer wrote that those who do not want to speak (critically) about liberalism should also keep silent about fascism. *Mutatis mutandis*, one should say to those who detract *Clemenza* as a failure in comparison with the eternal magic of *Zauberflöte*: those who do not want to engage critically with *Zauberflöte*, should also keep silent about *La clemenza di Tito*.

POVZETEK

Mozartovo *La clemenza di Tito* je treba postaviti na tisto mesto, ki označuje opero od samega začetka in ki nudi njeno osnovno matrico: odnos podanika do njegovega vladarja se odkriva v junakovi pesmi, ki predstavlja prošnjo, naslovljeno na vladarja, oziroma rotitev za milost. Čeprav je milost izraz vrhovne vladarske moči, ki se more dvigniti nad lastne zakone, pa vendar na koncu iz nujnosti naredi vrlino, s tem da kot svobodno promovira tisto, kar je sicer prisiljen storiti. V popačenju, ki ga je dodal Gluck, pride do pojava milosti v trenutku,

ko se podanik odloči dati na kocko svoje življenje. Kar se dogaja med Monteverdijem in Gluckom je polomija sublimacije, pri kateri podanik zavrne sprejeti metafizičen nadomestek za prisotnost svoje drage in raje izgubi vse, tako da mora – v izogib popolne katastrofe – intervenirati usmiljenje. Daleč od dostojanstva, ki ga izžarevajo strogi, a usmiljeni vladarji Mozartovih zgodnjih oper, Titova dejanja kažejo poteze histeričnega samoinsceniranja; Tita fascinira lažna velikodušnost lastnih dejanj. Lažnivo njegovega položaja odseva v sami glasbi, ki – kot vrhunski vzorec mozartovske ironije – spodkopava eksplicitno ideološki projekt opere.