

**Role of the Choir in Revealing the Main Theme
of Grieg-Bjørnson Musical Theatre
in the Context of *Foran Sydens Kloster (At the Cloister Gate)*
and opera incomplete *Olav Trygvason***

It is known that Grieg's work in the sphere of musical theatre arose from creative co-operation with Bjørnson. The works created in the result of tandem of these two great artists allow clarifying a number of concepts of Grieg's musical and theatrical aesthetics. Among others, they enable to reveal the role that the composer assigned to the choir in his works for musical theatre and implicitly in the opera. Researching this problem, in its turn, requires studying the information that restores political and cultural background of the time when Grieg's works for musical theatre appeared.

The second half of the 19th century is the time of social and cultural outburst in Norway. Gained its freedom and independence once again, the country starts its own way of restoring national identity. The role of literature was the most significant at the early period of this process. The powerful wave of Norwegian Romantic nationalism, the aim of which was national identity of Norwegians and their culture, was formed in the works of Henrik Wergeland, Johan Welhaven, Jørgen Moe, Andreas Munch, Bernard Hare, Henrik Anker Bjerregaard, Henrik Ibsen and many others patriotic writers.

The outstanding figure of Bjørnstjerne Martinius Bjørnson overtops this wave. "To say the name of Bjørnson is the same as to run up the national flag of Norway," – writes G. Hrapovitskaya¹, a Russian researcher of the writer's works. In the studies of Ukrainian modern theorists of literature, such as G. Noga, M. Zubritskaya, I. Starovoyt, Bjørnson is considered to be the spiritual leader of Norwegians and his contribution to cultural and political inheritance of Norway goes beyond the scope of his writing.

¹ Hrapovitskaya G. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson: [E-resource] / G. Hrapovitskaya. - Access mode: http://www.norge.ru/bjornson_01/

Till the end of 1870s his ideas are based on the firm aesthetic platform of revolutionary romanticism². It is known that the writer considered unity of Norwegians, their moral education, awakening their patriotic dignity and national identity to be the aim of his art. As theorist of literature I. Neupokoyeva notes, such combination of art concepts of Enlightenment and Romanticism was common for artists of a number of countries which had experienced discontinuity in the development of their culture and national language and which at the beginning of the 19th century started their way of national revival³.

Bjørnson's lofty ideals became ruling imperative for young composer Edward Grieg for many years. Influenced by patriotic ideas of his senior friend, Grieg completely focused on ideas of national culture revival in his Fatherland.

Following his friend and teacher, Grieg enthusiastically starts a completely unknown way of a dramatic musician. Influenced by Bjørnson, he sees way to evocate his ideas only by means of musical theatre.

It is to be recalled that starting with the 17th century theatre, the considerable part of which was opera, has been turning into the tribune from which artists reveal current secular ideas of their time to people. Later the period of Enlightenment ranks theatre as the main form of upbringing the society, and opera again plays one of the leading roles in forming social and cultural processes. Romanticism also considers theatre to be the bullhorn of the latest ideas. Moreover, Romanticism turns opera into the meta-genre of its aesthetic concept, as it is in opera where expressive means of all existing kinds of art are synthesized. It is not coincidence that it is opera that occupies the highest rank in the genre hierarchy of music art of West European Romanticism in 1830-1880s.

Inspired by these Romantic tendencies, Grieg and Bjørnson unite their artistic efforts to create Norwegian national opera. By the age of 27 years old, Grieg has had in his inheritance numerous piano opuses, including a sonata and a concerto, 2 violin sonatas, a symphonic overture, and a number of lyrical songs.

² Lungina L. Norwegian literature. Common ways of development / L. Lungina // History of World Literature in 9 volumes. - M.: "Science", 1988. - V. 7. - P. 416-426

³ Neupokoyeva I. General features of European romanticism and originality of its national roads // European Romanticism. - M.: Nauka, 1973. - P.7-50

And finally in 1870 the composer takes up *Arnljot Gelline* poem by Bjørnson, planning to create a composition for musical theatre on its basis.

Musical-dramatic scene *At the Cloister Gate* is the first completed joint ‘test of the pen’ of the composer and the dramatist. It is surprising that not the main story line of Bjørnson’s *Arnljot* became the basis of its libretto. Not the main characters and even not the main events of the heroic saga come over the artists’ mind. The composer and the dramatist focus on a minor scene, choosing from the plot just a tiny story line, the drama of one lost soul. As a result, the tragic fate of an unknown girl who experienced betrayal and death of her closest people and who decided to share the way of life and ideas with the dwellers of a Christian cloister after long inner struggle becomes the main idea of the scene that was intended to be a completed musical and theatrical composition.

The title of the scene itself defines both the location - in front of the entrance to the Christian cloister, and its complicated cultural codes: Christian monastery and gate. Christianity itself as a religion, the monastery, and the gate bear semantics of both all-European and national cultural significance. First of all, the renouncement of Vikings from barbarian paganism and adoption of Christianity on the cusp of the 1st and 2nd millennia played an important role in the history of Norway: that served the beginning of the unification of petty kingdoms into the single state and resulted in profound outburst in social and cultural development of the nation. That historical parallel resonated a lot with Norway of the last third of the 19th century that was struggling severely for its independence and unity of the state. The choice of adoption of Christianity as the way of life was turning into the symbol of joining the movement for state unity of the country.

The Monastery is also an important symbol. V.Vecherskiy, a Ukrainian fine art expert, wrote: “In all-European contest monasteries always were a unique phenomenon, not only spiritual and religious but also public, historical and scientific, and no other phenomenon can be compared with them <...> no wonder, German writer Thomas Mann said that monasteries created European

civilization”⁴. The images of the temple and the monastery often appealed to the artists of the Romantic Movement. They had a symbolic meaning of the place where humans overcame their low human feelings, shared Christian values, gained spirituality and the ability of serving high humanist ideals. The Monastery was the symbol of the society united by the single belief system, the symbol of some integrity, concentration of the single complex of spiritual ideas, separated from the outer world, from everything temporal and earthly.

Finally, the image of the gates itself where the scene is unfolding is also quite symbolic. Since the ancient times in different mythologies the gate itself had some special sacred meaning, symbolizing the beginning of a new phase, transition to another level, purification, and liberation. Sometimes the gate was the symbol of victory, the symbol of overcoming obstacles. There was always something unknown behind the gates: a threat or an unexpected blessing. Even guessing in advance what was hidden from your sight, there was always a risk to see something completely different behind the door. Sometimes the gates protected from evil, defended something sacred. The gate was inevitably related to the Way: whether it led to the doorway or, probably, started right behind it, anyway, only the one who was walking was able to find the Gate. Taking into consideration that the gates in Grieg’s work open the way into a Christian cloister, that is the way to spiritual improvement, gates of Heaven as the next step on the Way to perfect harmonious life also become a semantic code.

The semantics of the codes revealed in Grieg’s scene text is also projected on the characters of the scene. Formally there are three of them: the girl, the abbess of the monastery and the choir of nuns. It is worthy of note that refusal to use the name of poem’s character Ingegerd makes the image of the girl universal. It is her dialogue with the abbess of the monastery that takes up central place of the scene. In the context of correlation of opera forms in Grieg’s work, the choir as a group of vocalists performing together the musical text is used only once in the end of the scene. Therefore, at first sight, the role of the choir is to realize and to sum up what

⁴ Vecherskiy V. Ukrainian monastiri / V. Vecherskiy. - K.: Our hour, 2008. - P. 7

has happened. Nevertheless, analysis of functions of each of the participants of the scene and analysis of the musical drama obviously highlight almost the leading role of the choir in revealing the main idea of the scene.

It is worthy to start with the fact that there is no remark about the appearance of the choir in the score. Thus we can assume that the choir is present on the stage permanently. Moreover, absence of the clear part of the choir in the dialogue between the girl and the abbess doesn't mean that the choir doesn't take part in the development of the scene and in the musical drama. Realizing the semantics of a Christian monastery through the images of the abbess and the nun choir, Grieg endues the abbess with the functions of Coryphaeus of the choir. Representing the community that lives following specified rules and sharing common ideas, the abbess (in accordance with the role of Coryphaeus in Greek tragedy) on behalf of the choir realizes connection with the main character, carries on a direct dialogue with the girl, sums up the situation, reflects on it, emphasizes and sympathizes with the girl.

This function of the abbess is strengthened also with the help of musical means. Her speech is calm and balanced; intonations that will soon find its development in the part of the choir are full of inner strength and confidence. It is amazing that along with it each replica of the soloist contains a question. However, it is that special type of questions that are asked to help a seeking soul that is able to find answers by herself, to push her to right decisions. Nun's phrase constantly repeated with specific upward questioning end is outlined with strong quartal intonation that leads to stable tonic harmony, showing inner strength and firmness of faith. These features of the abbess's intonation vocabulary highlight the contrast with intonation sphere of the characteristic of the girl. Her responses affirmative on the surface are lack of tonal and harmonic stability. The effect of instability as the way of reflecting pilgrim's heart hesitations is reached by using numerous tonal and harmonic transitions.

The composer achieves the feeling of victory of moral values of the monastery dwellers thanks to intonation similarity of the abbess's part and the final

choir of the nuns. It is from the quartal intonation dominating in the abbess' solo that final chorus of the scene grows. The composer borrows specific rhythmic pattern from the part of the soloist, intensifying it in the final episode. However, choral arrangement of the music material gives completion and special meaningfulness to the choir. As for the semantics, the choir finally voices aloud the answers arising throughout the scene in the minds of the main character and empathic listeners.

Synthesizing Christian topics and choral techniques of Greek theatre in *At the Cloister Gate*, Grieg makes the choir the main character of the scene that gradually reveals its main idea.

It is known that tragedy in ancient Greece appeared in the time of transformation of the social structure of the ancient state. Grieg's Fatherland also experienced crucial period and a priori this explains the fact why the composer uses the elements of Attic performance. In the same way that in Greek tragedy the participants of the choir were simple ordinary people, everyone now who dared to "step across the threshold of the monastery gates," regardless of their status and social position, can make difference in their lives and achieve a new spiritual level. Seeing kindness and mercy of their gods in fortunes and beneficial twists of fate, Hellenes exalted their gods in praising choruses. God, not indifferent to the fate of northerners, also deserves deep gratitude from Norwegians: once before, in the distant history, Christianity played its crucial role when Norway managed to overcome social and political crisis. Therefore, once again, like this suffering character, Norwegian people will find peace and revival in Christian values and sincere unfeigned faith.

Inspired by the success of their mutual work, in 1873 Grieg and Bjørnson start seriously thinking of conquering a new peak, composing national opera. Searching for a plot, the artists pick an ancient legend of King Olav Trygvason, konung who converted Norway to Christianity and brought the Normans out of the darkness of barbarian paganism to their path to the light. The artists are passionately keen on this noble idea and within a short term first drafts of the

libretto and musical short scores of the opera appear. However, a number of circumstances prevent them from completing the process that has started so lively.

Since the second half of the 70s views of the country's advanced literary figures switch to a new direction: beliefs of Romantic nationalism are gradually giving way to aesthetics of critical realism. Bjørnson's interests also change. Gradually he loses interest in the chosen plot and in spite of all Grieg's persuasion he does not complete the libretto that has been started. Their mutual work on the opera stops, and *Olav Trygvason* passes into oblivion for many years.

Edward Grieg gets back to this unfinished opera project only sixteen years later in 1889 when he is a mature and experienced musician who has mastered composing to perfection. Having forgotten his disagreements with his friend the playwright, in sign of reconciliation the composer orchestrates available scenes of *Olav Trygvason* and adapts them for concert performance.

It will forever remain a mystery what was to be the first Norwegian national opera. Having neither opera libretto completed, nor certain literary original source that can be referred to, we can only make guesses at the plot of *Olav*. However, thanks to the correspondence between Grieg and Bjørnson, the approximate storyline can be modelled, according to which the course of the opera takes place at the turn of the millennia and describes the ascent to the throne of Olav Trygvason, a descendant of the old royal family. It is known that this period in the history of Norway was marked with mass Christianization of the Vikings and according to the Old Norse sagas Norway was baptized with fire and sword. That horror of pagans' expectations of the new Christian konung is revealed in the available opera scenes.

Even conventional reconstruction of future historical and mythological events in the supposed libretto allows us to model dramatic conflict where paganism of the Vikings will actively oppose Christianity planted by Olav. Even at the initial stage of the composer's work on the opera its implementation required from him performing special concept of the image of the nation.

The note text of opera incomplete *Olav Trygvason* features three detailed choral scenes. Apparently, the available parts served as the prologue of the future opera. The action, as opposed to *At the Cloister Gate* entourage, is unfolding in a pagan sanctuary. And yet, in spite of such striking external differences, the dramatic composition of these two works has a lot in common.

And again the image of the temple is in the foreground. However, it has another semantic meaning from the very beginning. At the musical level this image is closely interwoven with sinister tones of doom, inevitability of fate. Like a living character, endowed with its own will, the pagan temple is characterized by the grim leading topic that opens the opera and reappears in the climax of the prologue.

In the choral scenes of the opera Grieg mainly uses techniques that he tried before in *At the Cloister Gate*. Even in the first scene of *Olav Trygvason*, revealing the act of Normans' calling to the ancient gods, horror-struck pagans are waiting for the arrival of Christian King Olav, on their knees calling out to supreme gods to protect them from that "new, strong God winner." This ritual, whereupon, is mainly performed in "silent prayer." High Priest and Priestess in their solo parts act on behalf of all those gathered in the temple, like Coryphaei of the Attic chorus, and the others maintain their prayers with loud cries "Hear us!"

In the next central part of the opera oracular prophetess Vølva becomes an intermediary between gods and men. Performing the leading role of the national guide, she takes the place of Priest and Priestess, repeating specific recitative and calling intonational idioms of their parts.

According to the plot on the surface, it is evident that the Norwegian people deliberately reject a new religion unfamiliar to them, in fear of the unknown. However, at deeper levels of musical drama Grieg prepares fertile ground for the faith planted by Olav. Despite the pagan atmosphere dominating in the existing section of the opera, the composer endues these scenes with responsory singing, typical of Christian worship. Constant alternation of choral parts and replicas of the soloists that have the same verbal texts and identical musical intonations affirms

the unity of thoughts and aspirations of the protagonist of the opera prologue, “the collective identity” of the people⁵.

The final chorus of Scene II also has features of a religious hymn. People glorify the gods, hoping for their mercy. Clear C-major chords, fanfare intonations in harmonious choral setting create the effect of solemn rejoicing. Simple melodic line that at first “freezes up” at the last sounds of the tonic chord, like “swinging” between them, visualizes festive bells ringing in the listeners' imagination. Only catabasis rhetorical figure, monotonically sounding in the orchestra, creates the impression of fatality in the heady atmosphere of the part. Pagans enjoy future victory, not realizing that future changes are destined only for their benefit.

In the final scene of the prologue primitive pagan nature takes over, visualizing broad power of ritual dances, the sacred games in honor of gods in the final chorus.

Thus, the hidden grain of confrontation between ancient cults and Christianity is put as early as in the initial scenes of *Olav*. Bjørnson and Grieg, projecting the events of the distant past to Norway contemporary to them, try to reflect social and cultural situation in the country, relevant to their time.

Like the Vikings, not all the inhabitants of Norway in the 19th century shared progressive ideas of revolutionary romanticism that were close to Bjørnson and Grieg. As Lungina remarks in her works devoted to the history of the Norwegian literature, many outstanding artists, among which Johan Welhaven, Aasmund Vinje, partly Henrik Ibsen, shared conservative views. They were skeptical about teeming social activities of their antagonists, Henrik Wergeland and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, and, overwhelmed with fear of change, they debunked the Norwegian democracy, speaking for maintaining cultural and political ties with the past.

Thus, the purpose why Grieg and Bjørnson give a leading role in their musical theatre to the chorus becomes obvious. It is the chorus, as “the people's voice, the voice of jointly feeling wills of the past”⁶ that is able to speak to the

⁵ Golyamova R. Analysis of choral works. Dramaturgical function of the chorus in Russian opera of the nineteenth century: Ouch. Collec. / R. Golyamova. - Barnaul: Publishing house AltGAKI, 2006. - P. 8

⁶ Asafyev B. Choral scenes in Russian operas / B. Asafyev // About choral art. - L., 1989. - P. 44

present-day people, to reach hearts and minds of the crowd, and to convey the artists' main message. Norway, that for over four hundred years did not have independence, needed the spark that could ignite it to the national awakening. Turning to the legendary historical events of their country, the creators wanted to set joining bridges between the past and the present of Norway, as if crossing out "non-Norwegian" period of occupation.

It is not coincidence that in their musical and dramatic works the composer and the playwright choose the period of Christianization of the North as a crucial moment in the history of their Fatherland: the conflict between the comfort of the old, familiar way and fear of changes that once broke out in the 9th and 10th centuries broke out again with renewed vigor a thousand years later. Therefore turning to the images of Christianity that brought Norway unity and prosperity for years ahead, in particular turning to the images of the monastery and the temple gate, was relevant to Norwegians in the 19th century as a symbol of freedom, achievement of a new spiritual level and cultural revival of the nation.

The choir in these musical-dramatic works, like the chorus in Attic theatre, plays a communicative role of clear conveyance of the author's ideas to the viewer. To strengthen this effect, Grieg repeatedly uses techniques of ancient Greek choral art when from the single "collective image" a soloist is distinguished, an intermediary between the actors, the audience and the choir speaking on behalf of the latter.

Not coincidentally, the choir was at the centre of Grieg and Bjørnson's theatrical opuses and acted as the main character representing the will of the people. Such interpretation of the image of the people was necessary for the artists to realize the main idea of their work - awareness by 19-century Norwegians of their national identity and necessity of following their own way of historical development of their country.