

The Aesthetic Presentation of Tristan Und Isolde and Its Critique

Yufan Ji*

Xinghai Conservatory of Music, Guangzhou, China

*Corresponding author: yvonneji@ldy.edu.rs

Abstract. This paper takes Richard·Wagner's "holistic art" as the research object, uses comparative analysis to explore the controversy of Wagner's "holistic art" by comparing the application of holistic art in the opera *Tristan Und Isolde* and the criticism of Wagner's "integral art" and "*Tristan and Isolde*" in Igor·Stravinsky's lecture "Six Lectures on the Poetics of Music". Through the research results, it is found that Stravinsky and Wagner's musical stance is different, so the creative ideas alluded to in their works are also different, Wagner's revolution has brought tonality to the verge of disintegration, and Stravinsky's tonality concept is neither abandoning tonality nor sticking to tonality. The difference in the concept of the two has led to the difference in the work they create. However, they all provided new ideas for the development of opera in the late 19th century and even in the 20th century, and also opened up an important path for the preservation and innovation of the genre after the 20th century.

Keywords: Holistic art; no end melody; tristan und isolde; richard·wagner; igor·stravinsky.

1. Introduction

Richard·Wagner is an indispensable and important figure in the history of Western opera, advocating the musical form of the "trinity" of ancient Greece art, advocating the perfect integration of music, drama, stage performance and other elements. While the form is perfect, he pursues the philosophical and dramatic connotation of the music, so that the work contains profound artistic concepts. Vanag combined ancient Greece tragedy with the zeitgeist of the 19th century to form a creative concept of the overall concept of art.

The creative concept of the concept of "holistic art" has begun to appear in the early research on the formation and development of Wagner's concept of "holistic art" in the early German Romantic operas, and finally matured into musical dramas such as *Tristan und Isolde*, *The Ring of the Nibelungen*, and *Parsifal* [1]. Among Wagner's many excellent musical dramas, *Tristan und Isolde* opened the prelude to the non-traditional opera of the West at that time, in which the tragedy shows the all-round theme, character setting, music, stage set, character creation and so on can make people feel the power of tragedy. After Wagner realized the great value of the holistic artistic concept to opera, he devoted himself to translating the value-rich holistic consciousness into an artistic language, which he practiced in his own musical creation [2]. The various elements in *Tristan und Isolde* revolve around the theme of tragedy, tolerate and convey each other, and show human love to the extreme. "The philosophical speculation and the rationality of Wagner's conception of art and the sensibility of music reach an unprecedented unity in this work." In the triple context of day, night and death set by Wagner for the hero and heroine in the play, Wagner shows the contradiction between different superficial behaviors and real volitional desires.

From the perspective of "holistic art", we can actually grasp the core context of Wagner's musical aesthetic thought [3]. However, this musical drama, which combines the philosophical and aesthetic concepts of the composer, has been controversial in later generations. In 1939, Igor·Stravinsky was invited by the "Norton Lecture Series" of Harvard University to give six lectures on the topic of "Poetics of Music", and in the third lecture on music creation, he criticized Wagner's concept of music from the perspective of the debate on the quality of music and the discussion of "inspiration" in music creation, and then showed his own creative concept.

The author will take Tristan and Isolde as an example to compare the differences between the two aesthetic concepts, and start from Wagner's concept: the birth of "integral art", the application of "integral art" in Tristan and Isolde, and the opposing voice: Stravinsky's viewpoint. and Stravinsky's critique of Wagner's ideas and the work, in order to make an objective evaluation of the two composers' diametrically opposed aesthetic views.

2. Wagner's Concept: The Birth of the "Art of Wholeness"

The formation of Wagner's concept of "integral art" is mainly reflected in three essays published between 1849 and 1851: Art and Revolution (August 1849), The Art of the Future (October-November 1849), and Opera and Drama (September 1850). The premise of its theory is a critique of traditional opera.

Wagner's entry point focuses on the relationship between music, dance, and poetry, the three main factors that make up the integrated art form. In his view, the various artistic elements of traditional opera are only a superficial combination. Since music occupies an absolute dominant position in it, dance and poetry must be subordinated to the purpose of music. Wagner's view that "theatre is more of a means to serve music" led to a fundamental mistake in operatic composition. Under this theory, the combination of various elements in opera is nothing more than dance and poetry that revolves around music, in which only an inconspicuous role is played. The composer either adds some singing passages that have nothing to do with the drama in order to help the singer achieve the purpose of showing off his skills, or he splices large sections of ballet to suit the audience's appreciation. "This patchwork is not at all due to the internal combination of various artistic factors, so it often results in a state of isolation between the various factors, and the opera becomes an opportunity for the artists to show off their skills."

The reason why Wagner named his "musical opera" after his work of "holistic art" was to create an aesthetic object of "holistic art" by emphasizing the wholeness of the work. and the wholeness of sensory perception formed by the action of this aesthetic object on the aesthetic subject. Tristan und Isolde is the culmination of his own aesthetics.

3. The Application of "Holistic Art" in Tristan Und Isolde

Tristan und Isolde consists of 11 scenes in three acts, with 9 main characters, including Tristan, Isolde, Mark, Kuvennell, Blanghany, Merlot, Sailor, Shepherd, and Helmsman [4]. The story comes from the Celtic legend of the Middle Ages, the whole work is divided into three acts, although the plot is divided into three sections, but in the orchestra through the music in one go, Wagner uses symphonic music to construct a unified music form of up to four hours, the music tonality is complex and changeable, and the temporary pitch change is endless, completely breaking the audience's harmonious listening habits. The whole work takes love as the core: the initiation of love, the process of love, and the end of love. In each act, with the help of its endless melody composition, a huge orchestra weaves the sound, abandoning the traditional opera's narration, recitative, aria and other sub-compositional structures. State the topic in a more concise and intuitive form [5]. The starting point from this work to the composer's own will can be divided into three aspects: the portrayal of atonal techniques, the combination and interspersing of thematic motives, and the narrative function of vocal music and orchestral coordination.

3.1. Depiction of Atonal Techniques

In Tristan und Isolde's more than 600-page score, the music is always in a situation of continuous development, the tonality is unclear, and multiple sevenths appear in succession in each act, and there are few technical solutions, resulting in extreme tension [1]. The tonal ambiguity for a long time only reaches a stable state when each scene falls, allowing the audience to relax the tense nerves from the

acoustic scorching hearing. Wagner's ambiguity is rare in previous operas, and a large number of chromatic scales are filled, creating an atmosphere of tension and unease.

3.2. Combination and Interspersing of Thematic Motives

In the prelude to the play, Wagner uses his superb compositional skills to demonstrate several thematic motives needed for the plot of the music, namely the "desire theme" of the same name, "drug theme", "love theme", "struggle theme" and "death theme". Wagner's dominant motives are themselves short and concise, designed enough to depict his subjects on different levels. This dominant motive is the indispensable musical essence of the work, and it is not used occasionally as a special technique, but is carried out throughout, closely following every step of the plot [6]. For example, in the third act, in order to set the scene of philosophical sublimation for Tristan, Wagner designed the "shepherd theme" and "hometown theme" to pave the way for the transformation of the plot. With the introduction of new things, Wagner gave new thematic motives corresponding, and the constantly appearing theme motives and the old theme motives repeated, changed, touched, condensed, expanded, cross-referenced, combined and matched, which not only achieved a harmonious unity in the musical materials, but also carved the iconic theme motives for the characters, things, and scenes in the plot of the musical, with a distinct image. In a singing section, different themes are used to intersperse, showing different mental activities in the same scene. The interspersed use of themes prepares the way for the philosophical sublimation in Act III.

3.3. Narrative Function of Vocal and Orchestral Coordination

Wagner completely broke the boundaries between recitative and aria in his work. The vocal part is based on a variety of themes, and the material part of the theme is split into various forms, appearing not only in the actors' singing parts but also in the instrumental parts related to them. As the vocal singing took place, Wagner made appropriate adjustments and was flexible in his use of the theme. The band, on the other hand, plays an important narrative function and plays an important role in the development of the plot. In the first act, Isolde recalls her love affair with Tristan, and a variation of the "love theme" appears simultaneously with the orchestra, expressing the same situation---an irrepressible love for Tristan. In this way, the music and the actors' performances are integrated, and the vocal music and the orchestra interact and develop together to portray a situation.

Tristan und Isolde is an example of Wagner's mature musical style, and is the closest to his philosophical ideas and theories of musical drama. The "chromatic harmony" and "endless melody" in the whole work are like a vivid reproduction of the ideal of a musician's musical drama in music [7].

4. Dissenting Voices: Stravinsky's Point of View

In Stravinsky's Six Lectures on the Poetics of Music is a philosophical treatise that deals with serious musical topics in earnest language and serious musical topics [8]. In the third lecture "Music Creation" in Six Lectures on the Poetics of Music, Stravinsky directly criticized the whole art represented by Wagner and others, putting aside the subjective prejudices of composers, Stravinsky's rejection of the aesthetics of emotional expression emphasizes a rational and calm aesthetic paradigm from the perspective of musical thinking as a composer. He believes that the application of holistic art and its theories has caused harm to music itself, and that its essence is a denial and escape from the ontology of music, and he describes it in his book as follows: "A sober and rational mind will not believe in the paradise that holistic art boasts, and will always weigh the true value of art with an objective attitude [9]."

Neoclassical music gives people a cold, stiff, and dry psychological feeling from the perspective of timbre and orchestration, and from the perspective of creative techniques, it causes music to pay more attention to pure formal changes. Both provide a favorable argument for the notion of pure music contained in Stravinsky's neoclassical works [10]. Apparently, Stravinsky denies that "art as a

whole" is "art of real value", to which he gives the following reason: "It has always been so harmful to music that it has finally fallen into a specious state of popularity...The reason for this is that the shackles that are completely contrary to the laws of music are arbitrarily suffocating [9]."

He believes that Wagner's drama shows an endless glitz, the lengthy melody loses its rhythmic rhythmic rhythm, is an open provocation to the dignity of the melody and a functional violation of the melody, and his improvisation exaggerates the symphony to the point of incomprehensibility, resulting in an excessive expansion of the size of the orchestra, an empty and boring substance, and a lack of humility and noble novelty."There is nothing more reflective than this, where disorder is worshipped by the people, and obedience to order is regarded as something that does not enter the stream[9]."

Stravinsky divides the "dominant motives" into two categories, one is used to express abstract concepts such as fate, revenge, etc., and the other is the motives corresponding to concrete things and characters. He expressed his opposition to this, because the "dominant motive" is to represent a certain concept with a specific melody, which plays the role of suggesting the plot, and its essence is to form a certain agreement with the listener, so that the music can achieve the meaning of the concept, which is similar to the use of language. From the point of view of Stravinsky's notion of the non-semantic nature of music, it is true that music with similar linguistic functions does not fall within the scope of the natural expression of music, so Stravinsky naturally rejects "the habitual practice of treating musical works as transcendental ideas expressed in 'musical language [10]."

It is true that the system of "integral art" is not recognized by Stravinsky, and he proposes that "holistic art" has a certain embodiment of stubbornness, stubbornness is different from law, it does not obey objective facts, and its methods may satisfy a certain need, but it is incompatible with the various possible forms of musical art. Taking Stravinsky's view of the change of musical forms as the metabolism of nature as an example, he seems to think that art as a whole is more like some kind of art form that is anti-natural and inevitably obsolete. Based on this notion, Stravinsky points out that this is the end of Romanticism, and he argues that this form of music, far from raising the musical culture to a higher level, is so harmful to music that it eventually falls into a state of paradox.

At this point, we can see why Stravinsky is so interested in art as a whole. Although it created a new law that became popular for a while, the genre in this law put out the real important thing---the music itself. It seems to have built a huge kingdom, but in reality it is a castle in the sky that can easily fall apart. As he put it in his lecture: "The real danger lies not in borrowing what is already in the past, but in creating something out of nothing, enshrined in a fabrication out of thin air as a law and a system of self-respecting overlords[8]."

Thus Stravinsky gave a total rejection of art as a whole. First of all, on the issue of music and drama, Stravinsky is the opposite of Wagner, he believes that in opera creation, drama is the means, music is the goal, and the "light" music should not be made to serve the "complex" drama like Wagner, making the music difficult to understand. The framework of the overall artistic construction itself has become a disguise for completely shifting the focus of the drama under the guise of music.

5. Conclusion

In fact, both musicians have made bold breakthroughs in the creation of harmony and tonality, but the direction of change was very different, and Wagner's revolution brought the tonality to the brink of disintegration. Stravinsky's concept of tonality is neither abandoning nor sticking to tonality. He combines the traditional concept of tonality with the modern approach of compound tonality, which not only maintains a clear sense of tonality, but also expands the auditory field, which embodies the fusion of traditional and modern thinking. Stravinsky's musical stance is different from that of Wagner, which leads him to think about the other's musical modes from his own point of view, which ultimately leads to his own views on musical aesthetics, which makes his own insights more extreme.

Taking the endless melody as an example, Wagner believes that the "endless melody" is a structure that is divided into fields and no segments, whether it is vocal or instrumental, there is no clear

division of paragraphs, and the music is uninterrupted and develops freely. In works such as *Tristan und Isolde*, there is only a definite termination between the three acts, and between the scenes of each act there is only a rough chunk of content, and the music is continuous and consistent. Stravinsky, on the other hand, argues that the effect of Wagner's "endless melody" occasionally pleases the audience, but it hardly stands up to scrutiny. The expression of musical art cannot be free from all constraints, it must be limited to the range of sounds that can be felt by man. If the mode of composition is not self-defined, it will become an empty thing. Something imaginary may seem a little new when you first hear it, but repeating it many times will only make it feel boring.

References

- [1] Duan Wenxuan. Research on the Formation and Development of Wagner's Concept of "Holistic Art". Hunan Normal University, 2013.
- [2] Tian Jie. A philosophical study on Wagner's music. Henan University, 2014.
- [3] Guo Chun, Wagner's Concept of "Poetry and Melody" from the Perspective of Holistic Art and Its Creative Practice, *Central Conservatory of Music*, 2023:56-58.
- [4] Liang Dapeng. The Aesthetic Divide of German and Italian Romantic Opera. *Wuhan Conservatory of Music*, 2010.
- [5] Wang Xiaowei, Wagner's Musical Characteristics from *Tristan und Isolde*, *Journal of Changsha University*, 2013, 27(04): 123-125.
- [6] Zhang Pan. See Wagner's operatic innovations from *Tristan und Isolde*. *Music Composition*, 2013, (09): 175-177.
- [7] Wang Xiaowei. Looking at Wagner's musical characteristics from *Tristan und Isolde*. *Journal of Changsha University*, 2013, 27(04): 123-125.
- [8] Jing Ke. On the Aesthetic Connotation and Value Embodiment of Stravinsky's Six Lectures on the Poetics of Music. *Shanghai Conservatory of Music*, 2022. DOI:10.27319/d.cnki.gsytyy.2022.000190.
- [9] Igor·Stravinsky, *Six Lectures on the Poetics of Music*, published by Shanghai Conservatory of Music: 38-89.
- [10] Ji Lu. Stravinsky's research on the concept of neoclassical music. *Central Conservatory of Music*, 2011.