



Rachmaninov Troika 2015 (Baus)

From Forgotten Works - to Staging as Form

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“Opera is an omnivorous monster. Opera is the result of countless skilled craftsmen, technicians, musicians, singers, artists, and administrators work. Opera is passion. Opera is a lie and truth in the purest form. Opera is many works in one work, it’s symphonic music, arias, recitatives, chorus, scenery, costumes, etc. as all in one form or another relate to each other.” Kirsten Dehlholm 2015.

This chapter examines Hotel Pro Forma’s staging of Rachmaninov’s three operas. *Aleko*, *The Miserly Knight* and *Francesca da Rimini* produced at the Belgian opera, La Monnaie and shown at the National Theatre in Brussels. The question discussed is how *Rachmaninov Troika* balances between revitalizing the three almost forgotten operas and creating a new piece of artwork? Where should we look for ‘art the work’ in Rachmaninov’s Troika, which clearly triggers various understandings and translations of his work? An opera in itself is a composite of score and libretto, musical performance, and staging. In this context we have: three individual works of music history, three different narratives, each with its own gallery of characters and storylines, and three scores displaying a development in Rachmaninov’s musical language. A staging concept that summarizes the plots in a series of visual tableaux with minimal gestures, through framing and designing of the space and through neutralizing the fiction as well as time and place.

A discussion of the concept of the artwork

The notion of an artwork concept raises a question of what we really are examining when we want to understand a given artwork. Is it the immanent form and structure of the work by Rachmaninov or is it rather Kirsten Dehlholm’s production? Or is the significance or substance created in the performative here-and-now’s collective presence? The discussion of the work concept is also a theoretical discussion of who has the right to define what is art and what is not. The debate has played out differently within the various artistic disciplines with conflicting understandings of artistic quality. Is this determined by the audience’s experience of the work, the qualitative assessment within a professional art discourse, or the artist’s intention? Or is it the number of tickets sold that counts? In *The Authentic* (2012) Jørgen Dehs describes (with reference to the German-Russian philosopher and art theorist, Boris Groys) how the authority of an artwork is no longer exclusively institutionally based. Dehs indicates that the new in art cannot be separated from cultural recognition and appreciation, in a reciprocal relationship of exchange between the worlds of art and non-art. This exchange consists of two poles: the cultural archive and the profane space. These two fields generate a dynamic cultural circuit.

The phenomenon is most evident in visual arts, which are often operating in the field of

tension between the culturally valued and the profane, such as Marcel Duchamp's famous urinal, *Fountain* (1917). The cultural archive is permanently negotiating values, and it is the cultural archive that determines what emerges as the new. The philosopher *Jørgen Dehs* writes that the new must be consumed and privileged as a border and "the archive records what is new and ignores everything that is simply repetition". There is not necessarily a quality or a characteristic linked to what belongs to the cultural archive. What matters is the belonging to the profane space. Everything can be acknowledged as the new, since the new is no longer threatening the tradition, which has already been brought into safety in various archives like museums, libraries, universities, theaters, and movies. However, these archives specifically constitute the measure of the new, according to Dehs. With this view the concept of a work of art is dynamic while at the same time being used as a landmark and a compass. Sometimes a work of art is disqualified only to re-enter into the game at a later stage.

In 1917 Duchamp's *Fountain* was first submitted for the exhibition of the *Society of Independent Artists* in New York, but *Fountain* was rejected by the committee and the original got lost. But in the 1960s 17 replicas was commissioned and now exist at various museums. By art historians and theorists of the avant-garde the work is regarded as a major landmark in 20th century art. (Duchamp came out top in a survey of 500 artists, curators, critics, and dealers commissioned by the sponsor of the Turner Prize, Gordon's Gin. (The Guardian, 2 December 2004)

Within the performing arts, the relationship between the creative and the performing artists has been the focal point for the artwork: Is it in the literary dramatic text and the musical score the artwork is to be found or does the work only begin to exist when it is performed? What is the relationship between these two points of departure and what is the role of the performer? In the Western classical music and theater tradition the predominant opinion has been to look at what has been written as the authoritative entity. Based on the 1960s' and 1970s' performance art, a more contextual understanding has gained ground. In this understanding it is the interaction between artistic concept, performer, text, and audience in which the communicative act in the theater is seen as the focal point (e.g. Eigtved 2003, Sauter 2000). For *Rachmaninov Troika* it seems awkward to maintain an essentialist approach to the concept of an artwork. In our analysis, we focus on the contemporary staging of a new interpretation, which revitalizes and at the same time stays true to Rachmaninov's Late Romantic idiom, without changes in Rachmaninov's libretto. Thus *Rachmaninov Troika* insists on "the perfect musical construction" and that the work exists in the *mise-en-scène* and the performers' performance.

Kirsten Dehlholm as opera stage director

In the program book for *Rachmaninov Troika*, Kirsten Dehlholm quotes the Norwegian author, Kjell Askildsen: "Form is everything, but it is not enough." This is a rather appropriate credo for *Rachmaninov Troika* and for Hotel Pro Forma's approach to the performing arts. When Kirsten Dehlholm stages a production, she always works with specific rules. In the program she states: 1) in its essence opera is beauty; 2) as directors of the staging and visualizing we are servants of the music; 3) we use the simplified tales as

a general framework to create total images; 4) the tales only serve to create music of great beauty; 5) music and singing carry all the emotions and elevate the audience to a place in another world.

For Kirsten Dehlholm the performing arts are about magic and about creating the rare moments that supersede everyday life outside of time and place. Hotel Pro Forma's approach to a production is staging, framing, and a playing with genres, locations, and formats. This creates artworks where form and content are equated and this gives a different dramatic track from that of a traditional progressive narrative. The visual expression is the narrator. It is the form in its complexity, that is the focal point of a performance. "The eye is the focus, and it is through the sensuous we as humans expand our concepts and perceptions. In short, aesthetic perception is Hotel Pro Forma's primary concern, and the sensed amplifies our cognition." (Christoffersen & Winkelhorn 2015)

Highlighted by the orchestra on stage the music is the focal point and becomes a visual player, while the three stories are the impetus for the visual dramaturgy. "We start with the room, a large black painted room without proscenium. We fill the stage with a new scene: a stairway is like a piece of architecture between the horizontal and the vertical, a reflection of the ascending rows of the auditorium. We populate the stairway with the orchestra at the bottom in fixed positions and with the soloists and the chorus up the stairway in shifting constellations as composed images on a spatial surface." Kirsten Dehlholm (2015). With this device Hotel Pro Forma occupies the entire room. The staircase is not just a staircase; it is also a framework and a stage. Often it is only partially illuminated; sometimes the light changes so the steps appear as a surface when light waves travel across the stairway, and you cannot see what is up or down. Along with the musicians on stage the stairway functions as a spatial focal point and provides a concrete and visible link between the music, the singing, and the visual tableaux across the three operas.

In Brussels *Rachmaninov Troika* was sung in Russian, and most soloists were like the conductor Russian. There had been no changes in either the score or the libretto, and each of the three one-act plays was presented as a musical-theatrical entity with curtain fall and break. A common feature for a recurring criticism of all three operas is that the librettos are weak and the same applies to their plots. In *Rachmaninov Troika*, this weakness is exploited in the staging through stylizing the storylines. The staging constructively uses the existing weakness, which enables the three operas to be shown as one, and similarly the lack of interaction between the characters becomes a unifying element in the visual narratives.

Rachmaninov Troika

Scenically the three operas are linked to one performance in three acts of approximately an hour each with a break between first *Aleko*, then *The Miserly Knight*, and finally *Francesca*. On the one hand, *Rachmaninov Troika* is faithful to the published work. On the other hand, it challenges Rachmaninov's works through rules and the concept of staging. The framework of the performance is the wide white staircase with the orchestra on the stage. Kirsten Dehlholm has previously used the staircase dramaturgically — in *Operation: Orfeo* (1993), in which a high stairway dominates the stage and with lighting, music, and

singers as evocative contributing elements.

With the orchestra and conductor dressed in black and placed in front of the stage the performance begins with the overture resembling a concert performance. But when the light reveals the white staircase, and the singers in richly colored costumes appear, the orchestra becomes part of the stage design. In the opening scene, the chorus appear extremely expressive in their colorful costumes, flanked by three red stylized trees. The room and the stairway are the architectural vertical and the horizontal axes, which represent the framing of the work while characters, costumes, light, movement as well as individual objects evoke the visual images of the space. The stairway is both the stage from where *Rachmaninov Troika* is being narrated and serves as a concrete framing of the individual tableaux as well as a symbolic setting for the performance. Everything being told is from the point at which everyone is dead.

The second act, *The Miserly Knight*, works as a scenic counterpoint. The white stairway is partially hidden behind a screen, and the muted earth tones of the costumes and scenography present a harsh contrast to *Aleko's* colorful universe and the black-and-white geometry of *Francesca da Rimini*. The proscenium is flat with a filmed architecture shown on two screens in different sizes. This opera can be seen as a dramatic chamber piece with full orchestra and with just five soloists on stage and no chorus. There are two dramatic tracks in *The Miserly Knight*: one track is the film, which functions as architectural space and backdrop with a few action-bearing moments. The second track is the singers on the proscenium and the musicians on the rear stage. The film is shot in a neighboring building, an old abandoned movie theater. We see the holes in the walls, old windows, plastic, puddles, and graffiti on the walls.

In *Francesca da Rimini*, there is not much choreography. The drama is in the music and the light. Occasionally parts of the chorus get up and sit back again while the wind is blowing in their skirts. Along with the music the drama is intensified while light billows in various configurations across the stairway. In the final scene, Lancetto shoots the two lovers while the dead turn their backs and walk towards the choir's other dead souls. The simple action is played out through the sculpted body postures of soloists and singers in groups. This is amplified through the movement of the wind in the beautiful costumes, the colored light dancing on the stairway and a continuous process of tension and relaxation in the music. As spectators we are prompted into a universe of beauty from another world.

In all three acts the environment is undefined, its auspices are out of time and place. Instead of a representation of a course of action and a given historical time we are detained in the theater in Brussels anno 2015. Rather than a symbolic meaning, it is the visual tableaux, the light, and the materiality of the costumes that bear the performance forward. A few exceptions refer to time and place: the colorful costumes of *Aleko* associate with tarot cards from a gypsy environment; in *The Miserly Knight* graffiti are a recurring visual feature, where a few recognizable 'tags' step forward and indicates a certain contemporary place in the middle of tristesse – especially an iconic poster by Jimi Hendrix is a reference to another musical story of fate. Also, the Euro notes concretize a particular historical time and a Western European location alongside the associated myths in the hands of the

voracious knight.

Evocative costumes

Only a few props (tarot cards, a single chair, a table) are included in the performance, where the costumes play an evocative role. They help both to characterize and to alienate the figures and to provide color, texture and materiality to the white stairway and the scenic space. This applies for the elaborate and richly colored costumes and the intricate headdresses in *Aleko*. Very small differences divide the main characters from the crowd, for example, Aleko and Zemfira with their long dyed hair in green and orange. This is also the case for the lavishly pleated costumes in graphic black / white patterns of *Francesca*, whose ethereal lightness is given volume by wind machines. In *Francesca*, each chorister is decorated with a metal frame on the shoulder that vaguely moves and brings life to the scene. *The Miserly Knight* is different; everything is edgy with colors in muted earth tones. The five soloists wear shoes, mounted on something that looks like cobblestones. The costumes have a worn leather look, indicating immobility. Not only in appearance but also in their movements, the five soloists look pretty odd. Albert's costume serves to individualize him. He is the fat, indolent young man big and bald in his puffy suit, which caricatures his debauchery. In summary the costumes are evocative and the material qualities are an integral part of the scenography. By having the chorus walk about in the foyer the audience is able to see and sense the delicate refined tailoring and craftsmanship of the costumes. The costumes are also storytellers. They indicate an imaginary gypsy environment in *Aleko*, a universe of greed in the *Miserly Knight*, and they design a ghostly black/white underworld for *Francesca*. When Aleko has murdered the two lovers, he slowly walks towards a tarot card with an arrow through the heart and stretches his arms up as a sign of surrender. His back is black and white. The choir get up, move along the stairs and turn their backs to the audience. All the backs of the colorful costumes have turned black as have the gloved hands as well the headgear. The effect is both concrete and symbolic, and the significance of the costumes in the tale is evident. Instantly, the picture changes and the transformation in the costumes works as a scene change.

Dramaturgy

The plot is driven forward through a minimal choreography. The choir in *Aleko* moves very little. On the stairway the members of the chorus rock back and forth, while some stand up and others sit down. The dramatic progress is in the music and the lighting. Just before the climax of the performance the chorus stretches out their right hands, which slowly wave back and forth. With just two simple signs, Aleko kills Zemfira and her lover and the chorus puts their hands in front of their eyes. This has a tremendous effect. Slowly Aleko moves up the stairway and out of the light. *The Miserly Knight* contains a number of independent solo pieces, and not until the last scene do we hear a duet between the son and the father, the baron. The lazy Albert is sitting on a chair singing and only rises when he is affected. At the dramatic climax, there is more volume in the music and the film pans through various floors in the building. The two projection screens are displaced and the music increases the dramatic tension. Albert stands as a monolith and steps forward with a smile when his father falls dead. The money is his. Despite the simplicity of presentation the spectator is gripped in an elementarily

thrilling drama.

In all three acts the singers appear as stylized bodies that look directly at us. This is a kind of depersonalization of the cast, who rather appear as types than as ordinary individuals. But no matter how strange and artificial the characters appear, they evoke a sense of recognition. Monna Dithmer (Christoffersen and Winkelhorn, 2015) sees the bodies in Hotel Pro Forma productions through Derrida's glasses on hauntology. The haunted are neither alive or dead, neither present nor absent. This is haunting as an in-between-being (ibid). Dithmer argues that a ghost contains elements of a past but is also a harbinger of the future. No emotion is being exhibited on stage. As a spectator, we need to address the bodies and through the de-personalization of the bodies the sensation is delegated to the spectators, as Dithmer argues The dramaturgical concept gives a fundamental absence of theatrical and emotional scenes. When the lovers have been assassinated, they walk up the stairway to enter death. One is stunned by the scenic beauty of the stairway, the subtle use of lighting, the musical sound pictures or one is mesmerized by the way the audience seating reflects the stairway by the minimized, compressed form, in which the life of the bodies is unfolded. This provides a large space for the music to carry the plot and all emotions. The visual expression merges with the music, the big chorus becomes an organism in which the members move in and out of each other, in the same manner as different voices of the orchestra meander in and out of the music. The singers create a mass that cancels out meaning and signs of the individual, to become pure form in a visual fixation.

Staging as form – Rachmaninov Troika as an art work

Finally, we return to the question: Where is the work in *Rachmaninov Troika*? In the short book *Aesthetics ... to respond to the world of work* (1996) artist and art theoretician, *Sophia Kalkau* tries to identify the work concept. Kalkau makes a distinction between form and substance where form must be understood as the physical expression and substance is the idea. In this case, the substance is Rachmaninov's music and libretto, which are compiled in an aesthetic expression. Nothing is random, and "both the intended and unintended coexist and concern the work's authenticity," Kalkau writes. To stay with Dehs' terminology, the work is already present in the archives, which are the three scores associated with the librettos. But these works live a quiet life, and only *Aleko* has been recorded several times. The other operas exist only in the archives.

The framing is crucial for creating a cohesive expression of the production and as such for its being *instituted as an art work*. The stylized narrative dramaturgy is emphasized by the design and the materiality of *Rachmaninov Troika*: music, fabric, singing, and lighting. Through the stage director's insistence on materiality and form, the dramaturgy of the libretto is dissolved as an explicit tradition and reestablishes *Rachmaninov Troika* as an otherness that creates reflection and affect. It is this otherness that furnishes the opera with life and power. (Christoffersen & Winkelhorn, 2015: 302) The stylized framing and the visual images provide life to the occasionally rather pompous Late Romantic tonal universe. But it is also the other way around: the music provides life to the tableaux. It is this fusion of music and image that prospers.

The visually magnificent tableaux leave space for the music and the radical and consistent scenic control reduces the tales to a minimum of action. Despite the stylized dramaturgy *Rachmaninov Troika* supports the individual narratives. It is in the music the emotions are expressed and Hotel Pro Forma's consistent design gives new life to Rachmaninov's romantic soundscape. The minimalist staging turns the three operas into a contemporary piece of work. The artwork concept has been challenged by new formats and genres, but simultaneously the work concept allows us to speak meaningfully about an artwork. It is the very framing that is fundamental. The discussion of an artwork raises a number of questions about art and quality, assessment criteria and criticism, and not least the question of how we can speak meaningfully about the performing arts.