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***King Lear* : une œuvre inter- et pluri-médiale**

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PLAN

TEXTE

1 When it comes to operatic adaptations of literary classics, *King Lear* stands in a class of its own. This play has deterred some of the most famous musicians of all time. Thus, after pondering over the tempting, yet overwhelming, intricacy of William Shakespeare's famous double plot,[1] composers such as Hector Berlioz, Ernest Bloch, Benjamin Britten, Claude Debussy, Henri Duparc, Edward Elgar, Joseph Haydn, Pietro Mascagni, Giacomo Puccini, Henry Purcell, Giuseppe Verdi or Richard Wagner thought it wiser to withdraw from such an enterprise. As critic Winton Dean stated, "only lesser beings have rushed in, mostly in Italy and France, with results that could have been predicted" (Dean 1964, 163).[2]

2 Aribert Reimann[3] was perfectly aware of such a specificity when he started working in 1975 with librettist Claus H. Henneberg on a possible libretto for their opera *Lear*. "I hesitated much, rejected the idea. But I kept on reading the play during the year" (Reimann 1978, 51), the German composer said later. Still, the premiere took place on 9 July 1978 at the Munich National Theatre. It was highly successful. Reimann's *Lear* was the achievement of a composer then aged 42, known as a professor of contemporary lieder at the Hamburg Conservatory and piano accompanist for singers such as Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. For the first time, an attempt to match Shakespeare's play on operatic grounds seemed definitely praiseworthy.[4] For a long while, numerous Shakespeare critics

have tended, in different ways, to single out *King Lear* from the rest of his plays, although recent criticism is tempted to regard this play as probably the best Shakespeare wrote, along with *Hamlet*. Some simply wished to "pass this play over, and say nothing about it" (Hazlitt 57), others thought that "auprès de *Lear*, les autres tragédies nous semblent raisonnables, bien composées, à la mesure de l'homme" (Fluchère 338) or that it was a "Leviathan" (Lamb 33), "Shakespeare's greatest achievement, but [...] not his best play" (Bradley 199), "the most perfect specimen of dramatic poetry existing in the world" (Shelley 134), even "the most tremendous effort of Shakespeare as a poet" (Coleridge 2)...

3 What follows, however, is not to determine whether *King Lear* deserves such comments or not. It is rather to examine a way to solve the all-time contradiction lurking between two different art-forms: opera and drama. Undoubtedly, the unusual scope and the intensity of the play make their combination even more difficult. A life-long Shakespeare lover and musical translator, Giuseppe Verdi delivered a grim diagnosis about the feasibility of such an effort. According to him, *King Lear* is "so vast and intricate that it seems impossible one could make an opera out of it" (Osborne 59). Fortunately, such words of warning did not put an end to Reimann and Henneberg's project. Let us try to see how these bold artists managed to turn *King Lear* into an effective opera. More precisely, we will look at the way they solved the four main problems usually faced by any would-be lyrical adapter of a Shakespeare play.

4 First of all, the fact that a spoken word is usually much more quickly delivered than a sung word leads to necessary cuts in the original text. As far as action is concerned, what should be left out and what should be kept? Is there a way for composers to speed up lyrical action without betraying or defacing their source of inspiration? Then appears another puzzling problem coming, this time, from the richness and ambiguity of some of Shakespeare's characters. How did the German pair manage to avoid damaging Shakespeare's finely sketched characters? What original solutions did they imagine in order to deal with characters such as Lear himself, but also Cordelia, Edgar or Gloucester, for instance? Then, since opera—compared to theatre—seems to offer a wider range of possibilities as far as the use of human voice is concerned (from normal speech to shouts and

murmurs, but including also psalmody, monody, accompanied or unaccompanied recitatives, *coloraturas*, high pitched *arias*, falsettos, ensembles…), Reimann and Henneberg decided to set up their own scale of emotional expression, as will be detailed in our part 3. But does it work in *Lear* and how? Finally, opera being an art form with plots and agents that are definitely larger than life, adapting a play on the lyrical stage is a project that has to be tackled with extra precaution. Obviously, with a drama like *King Lear*, we are also in a land that is bigger than life. Yet it is not exactly the same land: if exaggeration is part of the essence of opera, psychology is usually poor. Therefore, how can such a gap be filled? How is it possible for a composer to take advantage of the melodramatic opportunities to be found in the original text? Should they be left out or re-shaped? And what does it mean when it comes to connecting drama and music? Thus, we will try to show how Reimann and Henneberg achieved a genuine tour de force, not only turning their *Lear* into an outstanding adaptation of *King Lear*, but also helping us to understand why some adaptations of Shakespearian plays for opera are successful and others are not. [5]

Speeding up Shakespeare

5 Actually, opera and drama are dubious, at times antagonistic, partners since both pull in opposite directions. In the first place, the *tempi* of theater and opera are totally different. The usual delivery of the spoken word is incomparably quicker than that of a sung word. Thus, a librettist adapting a theatrical masterpiece first has to drastically reduce the play down to a near quarter of its original length (though most productions of Shakespeare's plays cut the text to some extent), if he does not want his opera to be just as long as the whole of Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and see his audience slumber. If working on *King Lear*, his task is bound to prove harder as this play is one of the longest ever written by Shakespeare. [6] In the prospect of a lyrical performance, minor characters or events must be left out. Thus, for instance, characters such as Burgundy or Oswald are omitted in Reimann's *Lear*. Occasionally, whole scenes or even a complete sub-plot have to be sacrificed. But this may simply not do the trick. In 1975, sketching his libretto for Reimann's *Lear*, Claus H. Henneberg faced this very problem:

> Tout d'abord, je me mis à condenser simplement certains passages du drame, ainsi qu'on le ferait pour une représentation de théâtre parlé, tout en réalisant combien j'enlevais de la vigueur au poème. En outre, il s'avéra que j'obtenais encore un opéra de six heures, même si je ne conservais que les scènes indispensables. (Henneberg 12)

6 Mere cutting is only one of the means to make up for the slack between two different delivery speeds. It has to be supplemented by a more efficient technique, such as melting several scenes into one. For instance, let us pay attention to the German librettist's treatment of the two scenes [7] where Goneril (I.4, 180–314) then Regan (II.2, 339–499) turn their father out of doors. These scenes are merged together in the opera (I.2, bars 664–918). [8] As they stand, these bars concentrate the peak sequences of an action to which Shakespeare devoted half of act I (the quarrel with Goneril) and nearly the whole of act II (the parallel quarrel with Regan). Moreover, they illustrate from another point of view the different speed of action proper to opera and drama. "In the spoken drama, wrote W. H. Auden, the discovery of the mistake can be a slow process and often, indeed, the more gradual it is the greater the dramatic interest is, in a libretto the drama of recognition must be tropically abrupt, […], song cannot walk, it can only jump" (Auden 9). [9] These two Shakespeare scenes (I.4, 180–314 and II.2, 339–499) were ill-suited to opera tempo. Once merged, they offer a better dramatic balance presenting us immediately with two harpies blatantly joining hands in order to deprive of his belongings a "poor, infirm, weak and despised old man" (III.2, 20): their father and former King. Not only are words saved, but the inescapable tragic spell of the whole plot is greatly enhanced in the perspective of an operatic adaptation.

7 Nevertheless, this device is not free from drawbacks. Much of the interest in these two passages is derived from Shakespeare minutely combining a progressive unfolding of the real nature of his protagonists—scene after scene they are individuated, especially the two sisters—on the one hand, and a steady increase of the dramatic tension on the other. For instance, Shakespeare's act II, scene 2, shows Lear more and more viciously humiliated by his shameless daughters. Such a gradual destructive process going from the "scared

bravado" branded by Harley Granville-Barker as Goneril's former attitude towards Lear (Granville-Barker 33) to the final decision to cast him out has been left out in the libretto.

8 I would also like to point out that simultaneity has not exactly the same meaning in a theatre and in an opera house. For instance, Reimann is able, in his opera, to develop *together* two strongly contrasted scenes (Shakespeare's IV.2, 17–28 and IV.4, 1–20), when the Bard's technique consists in suggesting simultaneity rather than actually writing it directly into his plays. In *Lear*, half the stage represents Albany's castle and is devoted to the Goneril-Edmund lust scene, while the other half, located near Dover, features Cordelia "as a kind of beneficent Goddess of Nature" (Danby 134) pitying her father's fate. Vocal lines are entwined, making us jump incessantly from one camp to the other. Moreover, throughout the passage (II.2, bars 147–232) the orchestral texture is progressively penetrated by a sense of impending danger: double-basses roar louder and louder at Cordelia's entrance, a few bars later threatening *sul ponticello* violins punctuate her invocation to the "virtues of the earth" (IV.4, 16). Each party seems to keep a watchful eye on the other while forwarding its own pawns. Significantly, Cordelia's imploring speech, based on *King Lear*'s IV.4, 15–20, is delivered thus:

> **Cordelia** (near Dover):
> *All ihr glücklichen Geheimnisse, …*
> **Goneril** (in Albany's castle):
> *Mein tapferer Edmund, Graf von Gloster!* (Shakespeare IV.2, 25)
> **Cordelia** (near Dover):
> *… ihr unbekannten Heilkräfte der Erde, …*
> **Goneril** (in Albany's castle):
> *Ich schicke Nachricht über alles,*
> *was diesen vorgeht.* (Shakespeare IV.2, 18–19)
> **Cordelia** (near Dover):
> *… sprießt unter meinen Tränen hervor,*
> *heilt diesen alten Mann.*[10]

9 In other words, "while the order of the inner world of feeling is described, the outer order of the political sphere is not forgotten" to quote John F. Danby (Danby 135). In this instance, Reimann and Henneberg not only manage to compress the drama without defacing

it, but what was to be implicitly understood in Shakespeare becomes visible in their opera, this being legitimate in the prospect of an operatic adaptation. Immediately effective as it might be, this treatment is not something original. As a matter of fact, Bernd Aloïs Zimmermann, in his opera *Die Soldaten* (1965), had already used simultaneous scenes.

What is to be done with Shakespeare's characters?

10 Another reason for conflict between opera and drama, these two "notoriously unaccommodating bedfellows" (Dean 1965, 75), rests in the nature of the characters themselves. Self-deception, passivity or metaphysical concerns are certainly rich shafts of ore out of which fascinating characters in a novel or a drama can be dug, yet for librettists these dispositions have proved more than once to be quicksands. For example, numerous composers, from early 18th-century Francesco Gasparini up to 20th-century dodecaphonic Humphrey Searle,[11] have considered the workability of a lyric *Hamlet*. Hack or top librettists, among whom Arrigo Boito whose collaboration with Verdi on *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893) propelled him to the heights of operatic stardom, have penned their versions. Bewitched by the ghost of Hamlet's father or puzzled by the young prince's "antic disposition," none of them has ever reached any sort of success, though some scores are still remembered today, such as Ambroise Thomas' *Hamlet* (1868). Adrian Leverkühn, in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, may be right when he says that "music is ambiguity turned as a system" (Mann 1997, 51), yet as far as opera is concerned, this definition seems to be a dead end. Here, what is sung must correspond to dramatic reality, and any kind of distanciation would be out of place.

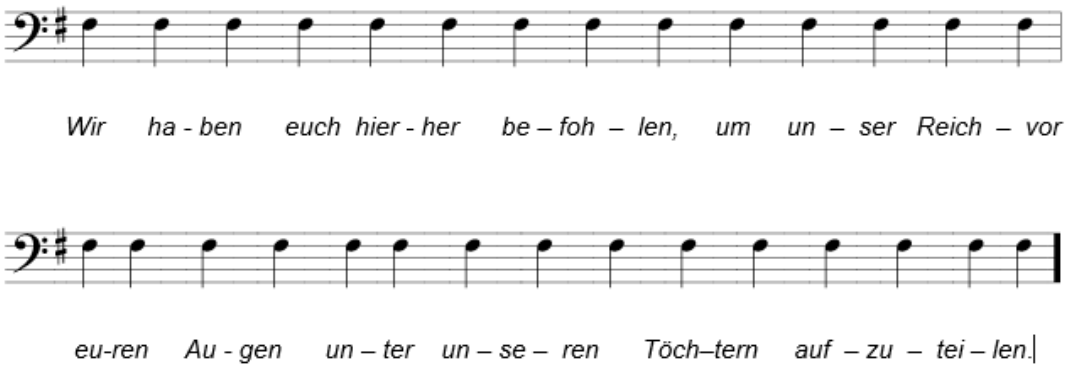
11 In this respect, *King Lear* has much to fear from the industry of would-be operatic adapters. Undoubtedly, the *dramatis personae* of the play features characters likely to appeal to any composer. In this category the most prominent figure is Kent. Though a secondary character in the drama, his unquestionable physical courage, his unwavering allegiance to the royal prerogatives, his stubborn desire to protect and serve the King in spite of Lear himself make him fit for

the opera-house. Other characters belong to the same group, such as Edmund, though the words sung by this hypocritical Machiavel and Iago's match in villainy are often lies. Yet deceivers in opera can be aptly depicted by having the orchestral texture at variance with their vocal line. But, unless they are used very cautiously, such devices bring confusion rather than anything else. Quite naturally, the evil sisters, too, belong to this category, since boundless struggle for power is one of the most appealing and pictorial themes on a lyrical stage alongside with passionate love. The history of opera is full of variations on this theme, and, for instance, the daughters' revengeful duet in *Lear* (I.2, bars 554–662) has a neo-Wagnerian flavour: it reminds one of the similar Ortrud-Telramund duet in *Lohengrin* (1850).

12 Yet not all characters in *King Lear* are built on this pattern. Thus, Lear, Cordelia, Edgar and Gloucester represent a much stiffer challenge. For instance, how should a composer handle Lear's evolution in relation to his widely diverging experiences: madness, remorse, despair, submission? What should one do with Gloucester's desire to keep a foot in each camp up to the third act? Cordelia—the most silent character among the main protagonists (she only has 114 lines and appears in just four scenes)—is sure to force a librettist into desperate measures for even when absent, she looms large in the drama. Her part is what William R. Elton calls "a constant *argumentum ex silentio*" (Elton 75). A nightmare in terms of operatic translation. When faced with such cruxes, librettists and composers are usually left hopeless and helpless. For instance, Henry Litolff (*Le Roi Lear*, composed in 1889–1890) omitted all of the Gloucester plot: out went Edmund, Edgar and Gloucester, as well as every scene in Shakespeare in which they appear. In Vito Frazzi's *Re Lear* (1939), Cordelia never appears on stage, yet the voice of her ghost—not the ghost itself—is to be heard at the end of the opera. Admittedly, the credibility of an opera libretto rests heavily on its ability to generate extremely stylized climactic situations from which much of the expressive power of the opera itself will be derived. For, as Gary Schmidgall puts it, "music is uniquely capable of accompanying and vitalizing such explosive moments of existential insight. In its impetus toward concentrated and striking expressivity, opera is an epiphanic art-form" (Schmidgall 12). But most main characters in

King Lear are endowed with an emphatic vitality that seems to run counter to any stylizing attempt. Definitely larger than life, they are in fact "too huge for the (operatic) stage," as A. C. Bradley might have said (Bradley 247).

13 Among other reasons, Reimann's is a major score—superior to former lyric *Lears*—because he made no effort to conceal this very contradiction. On the contrary, he fully acknowledged it. Where a sung line would not do justice to a speech, Reimann gave up song and resorted to a particular kind of psalmody. Thus, when Lear announces his intention to divide the kingdom between his three daughters, he does it in the following manner: [12]



14 Where mere information is to be provided, Reimann uses the spoken voice, as Gloucester does when reading Edmund's forged letter (I.1, bars 351–356). In so doing, Reimann follows a path Verdi had already trodden in his *Macbeth* (created in 1847 and re-vamped in 1865), when he had Lady Macbeth read her husband's letter about the witches' prophecies on stage.

Uttering Shakespeare on the lyrical stage

15 In order to get away from the usual operatic dead ends likely to turn Shakespeare's characters into nonentities, Reimann and Henneberg devised a scale of expressive, emotionally focused utterance which expands the traditional span of the lyrical voice and, for instance,

includes shouts or murmurs alongside with straight ensembles or *aria*s. This scale of rising emotional intensity—from realistic to operatic—differs substantially from the one devised in his time by Gary Schmidgall and often used as a reference (Schmidgall 1977, 11).

16 Also, Reimann left aside the still fashionable Wagnerian leitmotiv (which Italian composer Vito Frazzi[13] did not) but developed a handful of themes or dodecaphonic series and sometimes superposed them as exemplified by Lear's death. The old King dies as the dodecaphonic series of the tempest and of Cordelia fade away. In short, every time the German composer felt the limits of the operatic genre jeopardizing his adaptation, he looked for original answers, sometimes in other fields, and tried to adapt them to his medium. In his mind, stage concerns come well ahead of any claims for orthodoxy or originality.

17 So when dealing with Edgar, Reimann provided his character with a double tessitura. The voice of Gloucester's son is that of a tenor, yet, in Poor Tom's guises, he switches to countertenor. This device confirms what Gloucester says (IV.6, 7–8 in *King Lear*; II.5, bars 391–392 in the opera).[14] Thus, downfall from the highest spheres to utter wretchedness is symbolically and ironically[15] translated in Reimann's scenic dramaturgy by switching to the upper ranges of the human voice. Significantly, when challenging his brother Edmund, the future King resumes his former tessitura.

18 Contrariwise, Lear—another outcast—remains a baritone throughout. Though the evil sisters tend to consider the parting of the kingdom and Lear's old age as sufficient grounds for disregarding royal prerogatives,[16] he never did give up his kingship. According to Regan and Goneril, King Lear should be replaced by a man from their party. Such contempt for the allegiance to the King's body and, generally speaking, disregard for the law at the head of the state, give license for subjects to break the law.[17] Significantly, Reimann and Henneberg did not cut out the episode (III.7, 71–81) in which a servant, revolted by arbitrary cruelty, feels compelled to put an end to Cornwall's and Regan's deeds and draws his sword against the duke (II.1, bars 94–102) to enforce respect for the law of Nature. While his very father and his brother Edmund do not recognize Edgar, Lear—even when roving madly—is still considered as the only embodiment of

royal legitimacy in the kingdom, at least by some of the characters. Consequently, his tessitura remains the same while Edgar's does not.

19 Comparatively, Reimann's treatment of Cordelia seems somewhat unfortunate. Though Henneberg boasted that, in his libretto, he paid more attention to the character of Cordelia than Shakespeare did,[18] we may not agree. Firstly, she is allotted what the German librettist calls an *aria* (Henneberg 13) when her line "mein Vorsatz bleist, ich werde schweigen" (I.2, bars 59–60 echoing Shakespeare's "Love, and be silent" (I.1, 62) just seemed to have paved the way for a subtler account of a character who "absent is, perhaps, as powerful as [...] present" (Elton 75). Furthermore, Reimann's much stressed idea of giving her a dodecaphonic serie, which is the exact inversion of Edgar's, is highly debatable as inverted series can logically indicate proximity as well as difference. No doubt Cordelia and Edgar have much in common: in Victor Séméladis's opera *Cordélia* (1854), for instance, they are engaged. Both are young and represent the younger generation confronted with the reactions of blind fathers. They are outcasts—though unlike Cordelia, Edgar must hide himself—and real embodiments of Danby's tragic axiom: "Goodness needs a community of goodness. And that is unlikely to be found in the world" (Danby 166). In *King Lear*, the initial partition of the kingdom has undermined the very foundations of kingship. This degeneration has opened the doors to Machiavellianism without any possible return. Significantly, at the end of the play, Albany, the last representative of the royal family, offers Kent and Edgar the possibility of sharing with him the reins of power. Kent refuses, while Edgar's answer is a rather bitter one.[19] In *Lear*, this passage is omitted, the opera ending with Lear's despair, the body of dead Cordelia at his feet. "Goodness needs a community of goodness. And that is unlikely to be found in the world."

20 In Reimann's mind, a musical proof of the proximity of both characters was more effective than mere lines added to the libretto. Structurally, this is well thought out, yet, dramatically, the process does not take into account a huge difference in the temper of the two Shakespearian protagonists. "Imperfection, instability, or confusion will lay everyman open to the necessity of acting more parts than one, until the order is restored. Duplicity will be enjoined on [Edgar] as a virtue" (Danby 171). But duplicity cannot be blamed on Cordelia.

Her early voiced resolution to "love according to (her) bond no more nor less" (I.1, 92–93) is her motto throughout the play. Edgar's series of social and strategic metamorphoses are unparalleled in the character of Cordelia.

> **Cordelia**: We are not the first
> Who, with best meaning have incurred the worst.
> For thee, oppressed King, I am cast down;
> Myself could else outfrown false Fortune's frown.
> Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?
> **King Lear**: No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison;
> We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage (V.3, 3–9).

Held prisoners by the evil sisters, she recklessly faces a very likely death sentence, while the old King tries to evade his fate. Unlike Edgar, she never conceals anything, either herself or her thoughts. She will die; he will become king.

Reshuffling the Shakespearian cards

21 A fourth major reason for the precarious cohabitation between opera and theatre is their diverging scopes. Indeed, opera is an inflationary art form, it requires extraordinary plots and agents from its demiurges. Thus, resorting to song as a medium for communication between the characters may appear partly justified. Seventy years ago, W. H. Auden summed up the requirements of the genre:

> The librettist need never bother his head, as the dramatist must, about probability […]. A good libretto plot is a melodrama in both the strict and the conventional sense of the word; it offers as many opportunities as possible for the characters to be swept off their feet by placing them in situations which are too tragic or too fantastic for "words". (Auden 9)

22 Thus, in *Lear*, we find most melodramatic elements coming from Shakespeare's text carefully reassessed. For instance, in the play, both Regan and Edmund are led off-stage where they die while Goneril stabs herself in some private room unseen from the audience. In the

opera, on the contrary, the three of them die on stage and within a few minutes: Regan, Edmund and Goneril die respectively at bars 745, 768 and 780. This triple death gives Reimann an opportunity to develop a thrilling death-song for Goneril whose atmosphere evokes that of an execution, barely supported as it is by a slow and regular roll of timpani:

> **Goneril**: Er starb, so sterbe auch ich.
> Mir helfen keine Götter mehr.
> Leib und Seele habe ich selbst zu richten.
> Komm, Tod und nimm mich,
> die dir so reiche Ernte brachte… [20]

These lines—II.7, bars 768–782—are a Reimann-Henneberg coinage not to be found in Shakespeare's text.

23 Gloucester's blinding goes through a similar treatment. In his play, Shakespeare has Cornwall alone applying his eye-for-eye conception of justice, even if "pressing poetic justice still further, Regan urges that both eyes be extinguished" (Elton 107) and then kills the revolted servant who has deadly wounded her husband. In Reimann's opera, Regan herself has an active part in the gouging out of the Earl's eyes. Of course, the symbolic value of the ignominious deed is greatly enhanced by having a female hand directly partaking in it. But mostly, it provides a cogent justification for the ensuing dialogue—a piece of sheer drama: II.1, bars 111–134—in which the real nature of Edmund is unfolded to his father who weeps tears of blood as Regan hysterically laughs and yells. Blinding Gloucester, she metaphorically helps him to open his eyes to reality. A librettist's task is to seek or create such crude contrasts.

24 Yet one ought to bear in mind that, as Winton Dean observes, "a good libretto is a scaffold, not an independent structure. To compare it with the play[-text] is irrelevant and unfair; if there is to be a comparison, it must be between the play and the whole opera, music and words together," preferably both on a stage (Dean 1968, 88). The poetry of opera is essentially to be found in music, words being some sort of springboards. When the two perfectly lock together, they can create "melodramatic opportunities" like the unfolding of Edmund's real nature. These "melodramatic opportunities" are the very stuff

opera is made of. They should break loose from the narrative network and rise to a clearly universal significance. Thus, much of the impressive strength of Reimann's score rests on such "epiphanies" as Gary Schmidgall would call them, such as the storm scene (I, interlude 2, bars 38–134) and the Dover cliff scene (II.5, bars 374–455). Effective as they might be, these scenes still need a link to connect them together. As Benjamin Britten's librettist for *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), Ronald Duncan puts it:

> There are points in a libretto where the drama must unfold, proceed from one situation to another. These developments must be heard and understood [...]. Other moments in the drama might give opportunity for a situation to be held or sustained [...]. I found I was underestimating the power of music to express precise emotion and characterizations, but later relied on its contribution to the actual statement of the drama. (Duncan 61–62)

25 Following in Alban Berg's footsteps (the opera *Wozzeck* was created in 1925), Reimann and Henneberg focused their libretto on the illustration of one individual and exemplary tragedy. To reduce Shakespeare's polyphonic drama to its essential simplicity and concentrate on Lear's destiny implied a radical clearing out of most political or social statements of the play. To the intricate Shakespearian plot, Reimann and Henneberg substituted a bare trajectory: exposition, peripetia, catastrophe. Summarized, their libretto yields the following synopsis:

- **1st part**: partition of the kingdom and Lear's decisions. Lear's humiliation. Confrontation between genuine (Lear's) and feigned (Edgar-Tom's) forms of madness;
- **2nd part**: excesses of Evil confronted with momentary triumph of Virtue eventually leading to final catastrophe.

Indeed, with Reimann and Henneberg, we realize that a libretto is a distinct literary form, "not a mere drama that is then set to music. It should be a drama which is written for music. This distinction describes the form itself" (Duncan 59).

Conclusion: reasons to hope

26 Therefore, condensing *King Lear* into an effective libretto is undoubtedly a very complex undertaking. Yet somehow the very nature of Shakespeare's dramaturgy does not seem completely antagonistic with the requirements of such an opera-text. Roughly speaking, a Shakespearian play can never be reduced to the sole meaning of its plot or even to the quality of its poetry. Thus, in spite of the inherent difficulties or impossibilities mentioned above, a librettist pondering over the adaptation of a Shakespearian play is likely to find his project and the spirit of the play congenial on three points at least.

27 Let us remember that Shakespeare's plays were not meant to be printed or read but actually performed on a stage. As critic Andrew Gurr aptly stated:

> The fundamental principle they all held, which underlies all consideration of the body of literature they produced, is that their works were written for the stage, for the playing companies, and the durability of print was a secondary consideration, the sort of bonus that would normally only come in the wake of a successful presentation in the company repertoire. (Gurr 22–23)

Now, as far as opera is concerned, few people, even among music lovers, can read a score at sight. Therefore, just like Shakespeare's plays, opera mainly exists when performed. This is a first common point.

28 Although it was not a concern at the time of Shakespeare's plays, let us point out that what we may consider today like apparent improbability seems, at first sight, to be a snare sometimes threatening his plots. For instance, Lear's initial partition of his kingdom probably appears to most modern readers as too emphatic, a somewhat far-fetched idea lacking credibility.[21] Yet this seems to be essentially a problem when reading the plays. On stage, the author's superior handling of his sources systematically blurs this aspect of his dramaturgy. Moreover, his most puzzling or depraved characters can usually be related to a historical or legendary trend, thus granting a credibility to their actions on stage. Lear's idea of a "Triall of Love"—as

Raphael Holinshed (one of Shakespeare's sources) called it—may seem to us psychologically improbable or too emphatic, yet it is recorded in several chronicles of the time. Opera and Shakespeare's plays may have diverging scopes, nevertheless they share a second specificity: emphatic vitality.

29 Finally, turning a play into a libretto implies, above all, drastic cuts in the original text. As we have seen, difficulties arise when one has to select the actual passages or characters to be omitted. Yet, by interlarding his plots with independent themes or *topos*,[22] Shakespeare fortuitously provided such a selection for the benefit of his future operatic adapters, though he obviously did not intend to do so. In the prospect of a libretto, these insertions can be removed without damaging the general sense of the play too much. Furthermore, this impoverishment of the play is sure to be concealed, in the opera, by the shifted poetic focus—from words to music—inherent to any adaptation of this kind.[23] This specificity of Shakespeare's dramaturgy cannot solve every problem a librettist may encounter. Yet, as such, it shows that, in essence, opera and Shakespearean drama are not necessarily antagonistic genres. Or, as composer of *Béatrice et Bénédict* (1862, an opera inspired by *Much Ado about Nothing*) Hector Berlioz said:

> Ce n'est pas qu'il soit possible de transformer un drame quelconque en opéra sans le modifier, le déranger le gâter plus ou moins. Je le sais. Mais il y a tant de manières intelligentes de faire ce travail profanateur imposé par les exigences de la musique. (Berlioz 1)

30 How this "work of profanation"—reducing Shakespeare's five acts and twenty-four scenes to two parts, five interludes and eleven scenes—was carried out by Reimann and Henneberg will be judged from our Annex 3 below. But, at the end of this paper and in a last attempt to illustrate Reimann and Henneberg's approach to Shakespeare, let us mention, for example, that most of the Fool's lines in *Lear* are not derived from Shakespeare but from an anonymous sixteenth-century text, *Die Ballade vom König Leir und seinen drei Töchtern*, as pointed out by Henneberg himself.[24] In a somehow similar and surprising way, when Reimann was asked why he insisted on having this very character played by an actor and not a singer, something very unusual in an opera house, he boasted: "C'est justement parce

que cela ne se fait pas, le Fou reste à l'écart" (Reimann 2022, 133). With *Lear*, the audacious German pair achieved a genuine tour de force no other opera creators came close to. Never wavering when they thought it necessary to go against current uses or aesthetics, they managed to be faithful to Shakespeare, while half of the words in their libretto did not come from his *King Lear* (Candoni 77). One of the main reasons for their success probably lies in this capacity to go recklessly against the grain, just like Shakespeare did. "Le[s] fou[s] reste[nt] à l'écart."

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ANNEXE

Annexe 1. – List of operas based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*, in chronological order (composer, title of opera, librettist, premiere date and place when any).

- Pietro Generali, *Rodrigo di Valenza*, Felice Romani, 1817, Milan.
- Ferdinando Orlandi, *Rodrigo di Valenza*, Felice Romani, 1820, Turin.
- Filippo Chimeri, *Elmonda di Valenza*, Felice Romani, 1845, Castiglione delle Stiviere.

Victor Séméladis, *Cordélia*, Emilien Pacini & Emile Deschamps, 1854, Versailles.
- Felipe Pedrell, *Le Roi Lear*, Alphonse Baralle, published in 1877.
- Armand Raynaud, *Le Roi Lear*, Henri Lapierre, 1888, Toulouse.
- Henri Litolff, *Le Roi Lear*, Jules & Eugène Adenis, composed in 1889–1890.
- Antonio Cagnoni, *Re Lear*, Antonio Ghislanzoni, composed in 1893.
- Giulio Cottrau, *Cordelia*, Giulio Cottrau, 1913, Padoue.
- Alberto Ghislanzoni, *Re Lear*, Alberto Ghislanzoni, 1937, Rome.
- Vito Frazzi, *Re Lear*, Giovanni Papini, 1939, Florence.
- Serguei Alexandrovich Pogodin, *Korol' Lir*, Sergei Alexandrovich Pogodin, composed in 1955.
- Fritz Christian Gerhard, *König Lear*, Fritz Christian Gerhard, 1956, Wuppertal.
- Jef Van Durme, *King Lear*, unknown librettist, composed in 1955–1957.
- Lionel Lackey, *King Lear*, Lionel Lackey, composed in 1977.
- Aribert Reimann, *Lear*, Claus H. Henneberg, 1978, Munich.
- Curt Beck, *König Lear*, unknown librettist, composed before 1979.
- Darijan Bozic, *Kralj Lear*, Darijan Bozic, 1986, Maribor.
- Aulis Sallinen, *Kuningas Lear*, Aulis Sallinen and Matti Rossi, 2000, Helsinki.
- Alexander Goehr, *Promised End*, Alexander Goehr and Frank Kermode, 2010, London.

Annexe 2. – Chronological list of Aribert Reimann's main works.

- 1957: *Elegie* (for orchestra).
- 1959: *Konzert* (for cello and orchestra).
- 1961: *Konzert* (for piano and orchestra).
- 1963: *Hölderlin-Fragmente* (for piano and orchestra), *Ein Traumspiel* (opera after August Stringberg).
- 1966: *Verrà la Morte* (cantata after Cesare Pavese).
- 1969: *Loqui* (for orchestra).
- 1970: *Die Vogel scheuchen* (ballet).
- 1971: *Zyklus* (for baritone and orchestra), *Melusine* (opera after Yvan Goll).
- 1972: *Konzert* (for piano and 19 musicians).
- 1973: *Lines* (for soprano for chamber string orchestra).
- 1974: *Wolkenloses Christfest* (requiem for baritone, cello and orchestra).
- 1975: *Six Poems* (by Sylvia Plath), Variationen (for orchestra).
- 1978: *Lear* (opera after William Shakespeare).
- 1980: *Unrevealed* (by Lord Byron, for baritone and string quartet).
- 1982: *Drei Lieder* (by Edgar Poe, for soprano and orchestra).
- 1984: *Die Gespenstersonate* (opera after August Strindberg).
- 2010: *Medea* (opera after Franz Grillparzer).

2017: *L'Invisible* (opera after Maurice Maeterlinck).

Annexe 3. – Summary table

When sketching their libretto, Reimann and Henneberg relied on Johann Joachim Eschenburg's 1777 prose translation, a version they thought stronger theatrically when compared to 19th century translations, among which August Wilhelm Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck's canonical version. The table below intends to point out the reduction and changes made to Shakespeare's original text by the german pair. For example, the brief opening dialogue between Kent and Gloucester has been dropped, just like secondary characters such as the Duke of Burgundy and Oswald. The same erasing process applies to some emotionally powerful passages, like for instance when Lear meets Cordelia after he initially rejected her and tells her that she has many reasons not to love him (IV.7, 73–75). On the other hand, the character of the Fool is given greater prominence in the libretto. It should be noticed that the composer insisted on the fact this character should be interpreted by an actor, not a singer (Reimann 2022, 132–133). Among numerous other changes, it should also be noted that the opera ends with Lear in despair, appearing with Cordelia's dead body in his arms, and not with Albany, Kent and Edgar trying to scheme out the future of the kingdom, as in Shakespeare (Bilodeau 82).

LEAR (parts, scenes, bars)	PLOT	*KING LEAR* (acts, scenes, lines)
I.1, 1–91.	Partition of the kingdom.	I.1, 35–121.
I.1, 92–123.	Kent exiled.	I.1, 122–182.
I.1, 124–152.	Dowerless Cordelia to King of France.	I.1, 214–268.
I.1, 153–194.	ENSEMBLE (octuor)*.	n.a.
I.1, 195–248.	Regan & Goneril secure for themselves Lear's former power.	I.1, 285–308.
I.1, 249–281.	Edmund to Edgar: run away from Gloucester.	I.2, 151–168.
I.1, 282–336.	Edmund's soliloquy on bastardy.	I.2, 1–22.
I.1, 337–415.	Edmund: forged letter to Gloucester.	I.2, 27–58 & 75–117.
Bars 416–451.	INTERLUDE 1.	n.a.
I.2, 452–489, 499–502, 509–511 & 532–554.	CHORUS: behaviour of Lear's "riotous knights".	n.a.

I.2, 464–487.	Regan & Goneril's refusal to obey Lear's summons.	I.4, 49 & 65–66.
I.2, 490–514.	Disguised Kent re-enters Lear's service.	I.4, 4–25 & 31–41.
I.2, 515–530.	Fool's bonnet to Kent.	I.4, 93–111.
I.2, 554–663.	Kent in stocks.	II.2, 125–136.
I.2, 664–884.	Lear's knights: progressive reduction.	I.4, 191–243 & 267–300; II.2, 335–389 & 460–467.
I.2, 885–918.	Lear leaves Albany's castle. Doors locked behind him.	II.2, 476–499.
Bars 919–963.	INTERLUDE 2.	n.a.
I.3, 964–1050.	Storm scene.	II.2, 1–23, 60–62 & 69–93.
Bars 1051–1076.	INTERLUDE 3.	n.a.
I.4, 1077–1216	Encounter with Tom: three types of madness on the heath.	II.2, 172–192; III.3, 1–19; III.4, 39–67 & 78–111.
I.4, 1217–1285.	Gloucester finds out Lear. Takes him to a shelter.	III.4, 122–152 & 168–173; III.6, 20–28, 73–89 & 99–102.
II.1, 1–134.	Questioning and blinding of Gloucester.	III.7, 4–93.
II.2, 135–146.	Replacing Albany by Edmund at the head of Goneril's troops.	IV.2, 11–18.
II.3, 147–154 & 162–213.	Parallel scenes: a) French camp: mad Lear sleeps. Cordelia by his side; b) Albany's castle: "Yours un the ranks of death".	IV.4, 1–8 & 15–20; IV.2, 18–25.
II.4, 237–272.	Mad Tom leads blind Gloucester to Dover.	IV.1, 10–11, 27–33 & 49–82.
II.4, 273–352.	Albany revolted by Goneril's behaviour.	IV.2, 29–98.
Bars 353–373.	INTERLUDE 4.	n.a.
II.5, 374–455.	Edgar/Gloucester: Dover cliff scene.	IV.6, 1–77.
II.5, 456–523.	Encounter mad Lear/blind Gloucester.	IV.6, 82–106, 128–131, 172–199 & 274–281.
Bars 524–542.	INTERLUDE 5.	n.a.
II.6, 543–626.	Lear/Cordelia: recognition scene. Lear's contrition.	IV.7, 26–84.

II.7, 627–643.	Edmund has to choose between Regan and Goneril.	V.1, 56–70.
II.7, 644–681.	Lear & Cordelia prisoners: “Birds I’th’ cage”.	V.3, 3–19 & 28–40.
II.7, 682–698.	“I hold you but a subject… not as a brother”.	V.3, 41–84.
II.7, 699–714.	REGAN’S DEATH (poison).	n.a.
II.7, 715–768.	Duel between Edmund & Edgar: Edmund killed.	V.3, 123–171, 235–236 & 250–252.
II.7, 769–786.	GONERIL STABS HERSELF.	n.a.
II.7, 787–849.	Lear carries body of dead Cordelia. He dies.	V.3, 255–311.
Bars 850–873	RETURN OF THE STORM (end of opera).	n.a.

* Capital letters indicate Reimann’s own coinages, obviously not to be found in the original text.

Annexe 4. – Main international productions of Reimann’s *Lear*.

- Munich 1978, revivals 1979, 1980, 1982.
- Düsseldorf 1978, revival Stuttgart, 1980.
- San Francisco 1981 (English translation), revival 1985.
- Mannheim 1981.
- Nuremberg 1982.
- Paris 1982 (French translation).
- Berlin 1983, revivals 1984, Warsaw 1985, 1986, Amsterdam 1987, Zurich 1988.
- Braunschweig 1985.
- Mönchengladbach 1985.
- London 1989.
- Darmstadt 1991.
- Oldenburg 1993.
- Wien 1997.
- Dresden 1999, revivals 2011, 2002.
- Turin 2001.
- Innsbruck 2001, revival Essen 2002.
- Amsterdam 2001.
- Frankfurt 2008, revival 2012.
- Berlin 2009, revivals 2010, 2012.
- Kassel 2010.

Hamburg 2012, revival 2014.
- Malmö 2013.
- Tokyo 2013.
- Budapest 2016, revival Munich 1978 production.
- Paris 2016, revival 2019.
- Munich 2021…

Approximately thirty different productions of *Lear* (translated from German or not, revivals not included) have taken place all over the world since it was created in 1978. This score is usually regarded as one of the most popular in German operas of the second half of the 20th century.

NOTES

1 The first plot is the story of King Lear. It begins with Lear's dividing his kingdom between his daughters: Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. A series of dramatic events follow, ending with the deaths of Cordelia and Lear. The second plot concerns the Earl of Gloucester and his treatment of his sons: Edgar and Edmund. Closely linked, these two plots reinforce each other. On this point, see Elton 267–283.

2 See Annex 1 for a chronological list of operas based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

3 See Annex 2 for a list of Reimann's main works.

4 "Eminent recent European adaptations include Aribert Reimann's *Lear* (1978) based on an extraordinarily austere rendering of Shakespeare's […] play," writes, for instance, Chantal Schütz, "Shakespeare and Opera", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, 9 April 2014, <www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1369569/Shakespeare-and-Opera>.

5 Out of the twenty operas so far adapted from *King Lear* and composed between 1817 and 2000 (see below Annex 1), Reimann and Henneberg's *Lear* is the only one to have entered the world repertoire of the most performed scores (see *Lear*'s main productions in our Annex 4). Appearing during the first decades of the 20th century, this repertoire combines numerous criteria such as general cultural policy, the programming policy for a given period and a given place, public taste, popular works that became a kind of heritage, the desire to present rare works, creations or re-creations… All this in a context where questions of financial costs weigh heavily.

Concerning the other operatic adaptations of *King Lear*, their interest seems essentially historical. In fact, they concern the history of opera rather than the history of Shakespeare. Some of these scores never saw an opera stage, others simply disappeared; a polite reception met the rest, except well received Aulis Sallinen's *Kuningas Lear* (2000) and more recently Alexander Goehr's *Promised End* (2010). As a matter of fact, when asked about all these works, a somewhat indifferent Reimann answered: "Il y a même des opéras d'après *Le Roi Lear*, un Italien [Antonio Cagnoni? Giulio Cottrau? Vito Frazzi? Pietro Generali? Alberto Ghislanzoni? Ferdinando Orlandi? …] en a écrit un, mais je ne voulais pas en entendre parler." (Reimann 75)

6 *Hamlet* is the longest Shakespeare play (30,557 words). Then comes *Richard III* (29,278), *Coriolanus* (27,589), *Cymbeline* (27,565), *Othello* (26,450) and *King Lear* (26,145). The shortest one is *The Comedy of Errors* (14,701). See <www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/plays_numwords.php>. Yet the number of words depends on the editions used. In the case of *Lear*, the Folio version is shorter than the Quarto one.

7 R. A. Foakes-Arden 2020 [1997] edition.

8 *Lear* is an opera in two parts, five interludes and eleven scenes. Part I: four scenes. Part II: seven scenes.

9 Incidentally, Aribert Reimann's third opera, *Lear*, was dedicated to the memory of Nicolas Nabokov who, in 1973, composed a *Love's Labour's Lost* on a libretto by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman.

10
Lines echoing Shakespeare's:
Cordelia
(near Dover): All blessed secrets …
Goneril
(in Albany's castle, to Edmund): … my most dear Gloucester …
Cordelia
(near Dover): All you unpublished virtues of the earth …
Goneril
(in Albany's castle): This trusty servant shall pass between us. Ere long you are like to hear … a mistress's command.
Cordelia (near Dover): Spring with my tears. Be aidant and remediate in the good man's distress.

11 The term "dodecaphonic" or the expression "dodecaphonic serie" is used when describing music in which the twelve notes of the chromatic scale are

used equally and each note has the same importance. Serialism allows for the composition of atonal works. Though he did not invent serialism or dodecaphonism, Austrian composer Arnold Schönberg popularised it.

12 "We have summoned you here in order to divide our empire in front of your eyes, between our daughters" (my translation).

13 Vito Frazzi wrote his opera *Re Lear* between 1922 and 1928. But this score was not performed until 1939. See below our list of operas based on Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Annex 1).

14 Reimann's sentence "dans *Lear*, le personnage d'Edgar mue en Tom. Il intègre le rôle du contre-ténor à mesure qu'il emprunte sa voix" (Reimann, *Sous l'emprise* 141) echoes Shakespeare's lines "Methinks thy voice is altered and thou speak'st / In better phrase and matter than thou didst."

15 Ironically, since social fall is being conveyed by a rise in tessitura.

16 See Regan's I.2, bars 585–589: "Und ist doch nur ein Greis, dem man sagen muβ, was recht, was unrecht." My translation: "And yet he is only an old man to whom one must say what is right and what is wrong."

17 Among many publications on the law and kingship in Shakespeare's plays, see Donna B. Hamilton, "The State of Law in Richard II", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Washington, Folger Library, vol. 34, no. 1, 1983, pp. 5–17.

18 "L'opéra connaissant la simultanéité autrement que le théâtre, je me décidai pour les scènes simultanées, ce qui me donna également l'occasion de tenir davantage compte du personnage de Cordelia que ne le fait Shakespeare. Pour elle, j'écrivis un 'air'." (Henneberg 13)

19 In the quarto version of the play, Edgar does not answer, his folio words being attributed to Albany.

20 **Goneril**
: He died, so I die too.
Gods no longer help me.
Body and soul I have to judge for myself.
Come, death, and take me,
that brought thee so rich a harvest … (My translation)

21 The same remark could be made, for instance, about the Anne-Richard seduction scene in *Richard III* (I.2) or the presence of double twin characters in the *Comedy of Errors*.

22 Highly patterned as they are, Shakespeare's plays always retain enough plot flexibility to allow a life of their own to some specific themes or ideas. It is possible, for instance, to study the political meaning backing Cordelia's "I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less" (I.1, 92–93) as an independent theme without defacing or losing sight of the progressive development of the drama itself. Such an approach could be focused, for instance, on traditional allegiance to the King (embodied by Cordelia and Kent) *versus* political opportunism of all-time and Machiavel-scented ethics (Goneril, Regan and Edmund). In the same way, at the time Shakespeare was busy plotting his play, skepticals and Christians were fiercely arguing about creation ex nihilo. This religious controversy is present, for instance, in the contrapuntal opposition between King Lear's "nothing will come out of nothing" (I.1, 90) and the "miracle" Edgar does in the Dover cliff scene: lying to Gloucester—i.e. saying what is not—he helps him to accept his fate, hence saves his life.

23 On this shifted poetic focus from words to music, see Jean-Philippe Heberlé and his remark about Reimann's work on atonality, "comme pour mieux mettre en évidence l'impossibilité de créer l'harmonie dans un monde où règnent le désordre et le chaos".

24 "Die Ballade vom König Leir und seinen drei Töchtern", complete text to be found in *Programmheft zur Uraufführung an der Bayerischen Staatoper*, Munich, 1978, pp. 5–8.

RÉSUMÉS

English

William Shakespeare's plays are one of the main sources of inspiration for the international opera scene. Over the centuries, some 350 opera composers have adapted one of his plays. Yet few of these works have been successful enough to enter the world repertoire of the most performed scores. *King Lear* is one of Shakespeare's longest and most complex plays. Significantly, Aribert Reimann's version, created in 1978, is the only one, out of the twenty other operas adapted from *King Lear* and composed between 1817 and 2000, to have entered the aforementioned world repertoire. The aim of this article is to find out how Reimann and his librettist Claus H. Henneberg managed to do it and, more generally, what this opera says about operatic adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. We will thus pay particular attention to the way Reimann and Henneberg tackled four major structuring issues. The first concerns the total length of the work and the cuts to be made in the original text. Then, we will look at the

way the German pair dealt with the complex and polymorphous nature of Shakespeare's characters, before tackling the question of enunciation on the operatic stage and its specificities in terms of action. Last, since opera is a global art form, we will wonder whether a libretto is a drama set to music or a drama written for music, and see how Reimann and Henneberg answered this question.

Français

William Shakespeare et son œuvre constituent l'une des principales sources d'inspiration de la scène lyrique internationale. Au fil des siècles, environ 350 compositeurs ont adapté une ou plusieurs de ses pièces à l'opéra. Mais peu de ces œuvres ont connu un succès suffisant leur permettant d'intégrer le répertoire mondial des partitions les plus jouées. Parmi les œuvres de Shakespeare, *Le Roi Lear* est l'une de ses pièces les plus longues et les plus complexes. De manière significative, sur les vingt opéras adaptés du *Roi Lear* et composés entre 1817 et 2000, aucun n'est entré dans le répertoire mondial susmentionné. Aucun, sauf celui du compositeur allemand Aribert Reimann et de son librettiste Claus H. Henneberg, créé en 1978. Le but de cet article est donc de savoir comment tous deux ont réussi à créer un opéra à partir du *Roi Lear* et, plus généralement, ce que cet opéra dit des adaptations lyriques des pièces de Shakespeare. Pour ce faire, nous accorderons une attention particulière à la manière dont le couple allemand a abordé quatre grandes questions de structuration. La première concerne la longueur totale de l'œuvre et les coupes à opérer dans le texte original. Il s'agira ensuite d'étudier la manière dont Reimann et Henneberg ont traité la nature complexe et polymorphe des personnages de Shakespeare, avant d'aborder la question de l'énonciation sur la scène lyrique et ses spécificités en matière d'action. Enfin, l'opéra étant un art global, nous nous demanderons si un livret est un drame mis en musique ou un drame écrit pour la musique, en regardant comment Reimann et Henneberg ont répondu à cette question.

INDEX

Mots-clés

opportunités mélodramatiques, adaptation, traitement du temps, proximité musicale

Keywords

melodramatic opportunities, different art-forms, time treatment, musical proximity

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