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The World of Classical Music in the TV Series *Mozart in the Jungle*

Abstract: *Mozart in the Jungle* is a popular TV show in four seasons, which premiered in December 2014 from Amazon Studios. This series is the first of its type in the English language: focusing on classical music and the life of classical musicians as its topic. In this series, the concept of classical music applies to the world of artistic music from the baroque period to the 20th century music, and to institutions that in the modern world represent artistic music, people who are practice this music and the target group for which it is intended. Thus, *Mozart in the Jungle* indicates that world of artistic music exists in the way of the *artworld*, if we understand this term according to theoretician Arthur Danto. In such a way, we are discussing the concept of classical music, which is not just some abstract concept. On the contrary, it implies an actual institution of classical music starting from the infrastructure of the institution, people who are producing it, to the building itself of that institution. Therefore, we are ‘targeting’ stereotypes of classical music and musicians, and furthermore, we are coming to possible answers on the question regarding who is Mozart in the world of the classical music featured in this series.

Keywords: *Mozart in the Jungle*; TV series; artworld; institution; classical

Art music in the TV format

This paper is based on analysis of the representation of classical music in the TV serial *Mozart in the Jungle*, which was produced by Amazon Studios for the first time on December 23, 2014. Subsequent seasons premiered in December 2015, February 2016 and February 2018.¹ The series is the first one of this type (comedy-drama) in the English language focusing on classical music and musicians as a main topic. Similar programs include the documentary series *Maestro*, produced by BBC classical music, and the Korean TV series *Beethoven Virus* and *Naeil's Cantabile*. However, these Korean programs are not in English.

¹ The serial received many positive reviews and several significant awards, including the Golden Globe Awards 2016 and 2017 for best television series, musical or comedy; the Primetime Emmy Awards for an outstanding mix of sound for comedy or drama series (half hour duration) and animation; while leading actor Gael Garcia Bernal won two awards for best actor on television (Imagen Foundation Awards 2015 and 2016), as well as the best actor award in the television series – musical or comedy (Golden Globe Awards 2016).

It is well known that ‘classical’ music is used extensively on television, but, according to Michael Chanan, “the truth is that classical music programming on television has representation of been largely eclipsed.”² Chanan indicates television’s problem with classical music, stating, “there is an aesthetic antinomy, an antipathy between television and ‘classical music’, because they present radically different kinds of representational space.”³ Why is there such opposition? One of the possible answers is given by Simon Firth who indicates that “television programming is not sound-centered but picture-driven, organized around an aesthetic of immediacy (rather than reflection).”⁴

In this paper, we will start from the statement that *Mozart in the Jungle* opened the possibility for theorizing not only the use of classical music in creation of the narrative flow, moreover, *the world of classical music* as a topic of one popular television format. Hence, we are coming to the ‘meeting point’ of two different worlds: on the one hand, the world of mass culture, media and popular culture, and on the other, the world of classical music and so-called ‘highbrow’ art.

The terms ‘classical’ and classicism in musicology are related to music of the 18th century, to the so-called ‘Viennese classical idiom’, i.e. music of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.⁵ In the *Mozart in the Jungle*, (as well as between people who are not connoisseurs of art music in real life) the concept of classical music is typically applied to the world of art music from the period of the baroque to the music of the 20th century. In this series, there are also included institutions that in the modern world are representing art music and people who are practice this music. All of this demonstrates that the world of art music (i.e. the world of classical music) exists in the way of the *artworld*. The concept of the *artworld* is presented by theoretician Arthur Danto for the first time in the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1964.⁶ For Danto, art is not just something which the eye can see or ear can hear, instead, it is knowledge of the history of art, esthetics, humanities, i.e. art is consistently *artworld*.⁷ Subsequently, the concept of the *artworld* is expanded and developed by philosopher George Dickie, who emphasized the importance of the institution.⁸ In that way, we will conclude that the elements which creating the *world of art music* in this TV series are: composers, performers, the institution of the philharmonic (and the micro-social situation and the building itself, architecture),⁹ managers, donors to philharmonic orchestras, etc.

² Michael Chanan, “Television’s Problem with (Classical) Music,” *Popular Music* 21, 3 (October 2002): 369.

³ *Ibid.*, 373.

⁴ Simon Frith, “Look! Hear! The Uneasy Relationship of Music and Television,” *Popular Music* 21, 3 (“Music and Television”, October 2002): 280.

⁵ “Classical,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 4, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 450.

⁶ Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, 19 (1964): 571–84.

⁷ Cf. Miško Šuvaković, *Pojmovnik suvremene umjetnosti*, (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2005), 181.

⁸ Dickie states: “What the author, management, and players present is art, and it is the art because it is presented within the theatre – world framework.” George Dickie, “What is Art? An Institutional Analysis,” in *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974), 430.

⁹ Cf. Miško Šuvaković, “Poststrukturalističke rasprave o operi,” in *Paragrami tela/figure: predavanja i rasprave o strategijama i taktikama teorijskog izvođenja u modernom i postmodernom performance art-u, teatru, operi, muzici, filmu i tehnometnosti* (Beograd: CENPI, 2001), 216.

Classical music as a social institution: between the book and the TV show

The plot of the series is inspired by the book *Mozart in the Jungle: Sex, Drugs, and Classical Music*, written by journalist and oboist Blair Tindall, and contains memoirs of her experience in the world of classical music. It was published in 2005 to many positive reviews. For instance, musicologist Richard Taruskin in the article “The Musical Mystique”, on the subject of defending classical music, wrote that the book, “despite a pandering title actually contains the smartest and most constructive take on the situation.”¹⁰

Discussing the 1980s in New York and the difficult fates of artists, Blair Tindall wrote:

Music transforms a schoolteacher into a beautiful diva, and sustains a renowned pianist who endures two heart transplants to perform with the stars who pay him a pittance; an American goddess of the arts struggles to fulfill a dream, her ominous future mirrored by an older musician whose fantasies drain away in her lonely apartment upstairs; a stunning cellist becomes an AIDS-infected crack addict and prostitute; a Metropolitan Opera violinist is jailed for selling cocaine; and an African-American virtuoso becomes so lost inside the elitist white arts world that he smashes his \$185,000 eighteenth-century French violin into splinters.¹¹

On the other hand, the plot of the series *Mozart in the Jungle* takes place in modern New York. Although in the series no one becomes a prostitute, nor goes to prison for selling narcotics (though one of the orchestra members is selling it inside the orchestra), nor do any Afro-American violinists break their instruments, one of the main topics remains the struggle for survival in the world of art. Thus, in the third season, on a tour of a philharmonic in Mexico, one violinist fakes the theft of his expensive violin to receive insurance money, while a flutist works as a taxi driver to solve their financial problems.

William Moriarity pointed out these problems in his critique of the book:

No book before this has so accurately captured the harrowing life of the free-lance artist trying to make a career in the music business as Blair Tindall’s *Mozart in the Jungle*. While her experiences are unique to her, all musicians recognize the financial insecurity, art frustration and personal chaos that she describes.¹²

This sentiment is expressed in one episode by oboe player Hailey (Lola Kirke), who says: “All I spent my time doing is like figuring out how to make money and none of this is about the art!”

¹⁰ “Books: The Musical Mystique,” *The New Republic* (October 22, 2007), <https://newrepublic.com/article/64350/books-the-musical-mystique>, acc. February 4, 2018.

¹¹ <http://www.blairtindall.com/>, acc. February 6, 2018.

¹² *Ibid.*

A common narrative topic of every season of the series is the fight for survival of art music institutions. Once again, this manifests that the series represents the world of art music not in the way of autonomous social practices, but instead, the world of art music is represented as all other social practices: within the framework of a capitalist society, and market dependent. The recurring fight for the realization one more concert season of New York Philharmonic is akin to the theory that the institution of art music was created by the foundation of classical music concerts in the 18th century. Financing musicians, i.e. raising money, is one of the elements of existence of classical music as an institution. The New York Philharmonic is depicted in financial crisis during the series, with managers struggling to find solutions, such as negotiating with different sponsors, creating marketing campaigns, and advertising campaigns. Yet, throughout, the members of the orchestra suffer the most.

The institution of classical music concerts would never survive without its audience, which builds its specific cultural identity through this institution. Equally in the series, there is a specific social group/class that (financially) ‘manages’ the future life of the New York Philharmonic as a concert institution. Mozart, as a possible symbol of classical music (concert), in his initial historical moment in Europe, and today in America, has depended on specific social class. Furthermore, this class identified itself through attendance at these concerts. In spite of that, we can say that the position of art music in capitalist society is very similar today to the previous two centuries.

Who is Mozart and what is the jungle?

At first sight one can notice that ‘the jungle’ in the book represents New York in the 1980s. On the other hand, the jungle could symbolize the entire modern society, which is the opposite to ‘Mozart’, who signifies the world of art music. Also, we can connect the main actor in the series, conductor Rodrigo (Gael Garcia Bernal), with the representation of Mozart as a brilliant and genial composer, charismatic, humorous, unpredictable, and childlike at times. On the other hand, in the series a different conductor, Thomas (Malcolm McDowell), is an older, more traditional and serious, but amazing artist, who is leaving the philharmonic at the moment Rodrigo is arriving. Interestingly, his appearance is in several occasions followed by Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, which could be understood as his leitmotif.

The main character of the series, we follow the development of Rodrigo’s character through all three seasons. Hailing from Mexico, his ‘exotic’ nature to great extent creates his character, which undergoes change through the entire series. His appearance is already specific: Mexican guy with darker skin and long curly hair, which will be utilized as an advertisement poster title *Hear the Hair*).

Rodrigo has his own world: through meditation he speaks with Mozart. Listening to the sounds of the city, he is not interested in the material world. This is a stereotypical description of the musician/artist: sensitive, instinctive, genius, one with

special needs that are hard for others to understand. The way of his (non)understanding of the material world is a metaphor for the concept in which the institution of art music belongs only to the modern Western world and only subjects of the Western world are worthy components of it. This is a modern world, a world of tradition and intellectuals. In that sense, these subjects cannot belong to the Orient, the exotic, colonized, and marginalized world. Symptomatically, he constantly fails to understand this. That is why he is always late for important sponsor events and declines to be part of that ‘world’. He declines to accept the fact that money is necessary for the existence of classical music, moreover, that music is not just some autonomous practice connected only with talent or intuition, and instead it is one area of social practice in capitalist society whose basis is essentially economic.

It is interesting that some authors compare Rodrigo with the famous conductor and violinist from Venezuela Gustavo Dudamel, currently the musical director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Nevertheless, composer and musical producer of the series, Roger Neill, explained that he used modeled Rodrigo’s character on that of Leonard Bernstein, which is visible already by the second episode, when Rodrigo is conducts Mahler’s *Eight Symphony* and talking all the time. In addition, Rodrigo is not conducting rehearsals the same way as concerts, which is visible through the series.¹³

On the other hand, we can connect the symbol of Mozart with the main female character, the young and ambitious oboe player Hailey. According to Neill, it was important to choose music pieces that will emphasize her role. For instance, in the first episode, on her audition for the philharmonic, Hailey performs Mozart’s Oboe Concerto in C major (K 314, 3rd movement), while competitors play *Scheherezade* by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.¹⁴ It is interesting that this concerto will ‘follow’ her through the whole series as her motif.

Performance for prisoners: music as a way to freedom

Through all episodes is the Kantian notion that music is something that acts as a beautiful, aesthetic experience that causes some pleasantness in us, without the possibility to name it. That idea reaches its zenith in seventh episode of the third season, “Not yet titled”. Namely, after 87 days of legal dispute and a strike by the orchestra players, Rodrigo with and musicians is go to perform at the prison on the Rikers

¹³ Roger Neill is a film and television composer, best known for his scores for the films *20th Century Women*, *Don’t Think Twice*, *Beginners*, and his work on television series such as Amazon’s *Mozart in the Jungle* CBS’s *Mom* and the long-running Fox animated series *King of the Hill*. (See full biography on his website <http://rogerneill.com/>) In the series *Mozart in the Jungle* he worked as a composer and a musical producer. Therefore, he worked in the team of people who decided which works would be performed in the series. Also, he was educating actors who acted as musicians. Neill divides music in the series in three categories: “1. Licensed classical music; 2. Created classical music; 3. Original music written exclusively for the series.” Carrin Tanaka, “Score Revolution, Evolution Music Partners,” Interview with Roger Neill, <https://soundcloud.com/scorerevolution/interview-with-roger-neill-behind-the-scenes-of-mozart-in-the-jungle>, acc. February 12, 2018.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Island. Symbolically, in front of the prisoners, Rodrigo and the orchestra perform pieces by composer Olivier Messiaen. This episode has the documentary format, and Rodrigo explained that he came intentionally to that place with the orchestra in order 'to find their purpose'. After the fight for performance space and the existence of the orchestra, Rodrigo chose to perform in the outside world, and, even just for one moment, to focus solely on the music and the sensory experience.

Before the concert started, prisoners didn't know what to expect and were skeptical. Rodrigo spoke to them of Messiaen, and the part of his life spent in prison during World War II, and the inspiration he found in birds, which to him symbolized freedom. He also said that he believed that there is always hope and that at the end love will triumph. After listening to the concert, the prisoners declared they never before heard anything similar before, and they felt 'free' and peaceful and, although physically still in prison, emotionally the music had transported them to someplace else.

This moment is stereotypically common behavior of the listener coming to concerts: he is all ears, and giving himself completely to an esthetic, sense experience of beauty. Of this example is demonstrated how the listener's body reacts and behaves while he is listening to art music, and the manner in which he or she sensually experiences it.

Namely, in the esthetic of romanticism, while the Enlightenment was in crisis, instrumental music is treated as a space above and beyond all interests ruling the physical world where the subject is not free, as a space where subjects have the possibility to achieve transcendental freedom.¹⁵ One of the patrons of this theory, Arthur Schopenhauer, interprets music as the only possible way "to escape from what we already intuitively know about our irreparable nature", i.e. to be free.¹⁶ Symptomatically, in the series, many prisoners stated that they felt free while they listening to music – free from the prison as a physically limited space, and from themselves, their personalities, and all bad experiences of this world.

Conclusion

Through this analysis of the series *Mozart in the Jungle*, we reveal one possible way of demonstrating the world of art music. Firstly, we had to point out stereotypes of artistic characters classical music that exists in the real world and in series as well. On the other hand, we related our idea of the world of art music with the theories of the Arthur Danto and George Dickie, and came to the statement that classical music is not just some abstract concept. Instead, it always implies the institution of classical music, starting from infrastructure of the institution, to people who are making that institution, till

¹⁵ Cf. Žarko Cvejić, *Ukroćeni virtuoz: filozofija subjekta i recepcija virtuozičeta u evropskoj instrumentalnoj muzici 1815–1850* (Beograd: Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2016), 160.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 53.

the architecture, i.e. building. In this way, we came to the conclusion that in this series classical music is represented not like some autonomous practice of beautiful art that doesn't have any connection with to the area of economical and useful work. It is not like one extraordinary artist – be it a composer, performer or conductor – a genius of great works. On the contrary, it is represented as a social institution.

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