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Gothic Motives in *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner* by Thomas Wilson*

The article is devoted to research of the opera *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner* by Scottish composer Thomas Wilson (1927–2001). The connections between the opera and its primary literary source – the gothic novel of Scottish poet James Hogg – are revealed. The author dwells upon the composer's aesthetic views, highlighting the special influence on it of the Expressionist composers, in particular, of Alban Berg. As an important step towards the formation of Thomas Wilson's operatic aesthetics, his opera *The Charcoal Burner*, preceding the *Confessions* is highlighted, and a short overview of it is given. In the research materials from the composer's personal archive have been used.

The author turns to the sources of the gothic genre, as well as to the particular features of the gothic novel. On the basis of works of English literary critics, the chief traits of the genre are summarized with the emphasis on those which have found the brightest reflection in the opera's dramaturgical and compositional planes. Bringing out the parallels between the characteristic gothic features of Hogg's novel and their musical manifestation makes it possible to come up with the conclusion about the special impact of the literary source on the opera, predetermining its musical image from the gloomy atmosphere to the intonational features of the protagonists.

Keywords: Thomas Wilson, James Hogg, Scottish opera, gothic novel.

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Готические мотивы в опере Томаса Уилсона «Исповедь оправданного грешника»

Статья посвящена исследованию оперы «Исповедь оправданного грешника» шотландского композитора Томаса Уилсона (1927–2001). Выявляются связи между оперой и литературным первоисточником – готическим романом шотландского поэта Джеймса Хогга. Автор касается эстетических взглядов композитора, подчёркивая особое влияние на их становление композиторов-экспрессионистов, в частности, Альбана Берга. Как важная ступень на пути формирования оперной эстетики Томаса Уилсона выделена предшествующая «Исповеди...» опера «Угольщик» и дан её краткий обзор. В исследовании задействованы материалы личного архива композитора.

Автор обращается к истокам жанра готики, а также к особенностям готического романа. На основе работ английских литературоведов обобщаются основные черты жанра с акцентом на тех, которые нашли наиболее яркое отражение в драматургическом и композиционном планах оперы. Проведение параллелей между характерными готическими чертами романа Дж. Хогга и их музыкальным воплощением позволяет сделать вывод об особом воздействии первоисточника на оперу, предопределяющем её музыкальный облик: от мрачной

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Ключевые слова: Томас Уилсон, Джеймс Хогг, шотландская опера, готический роман.

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Dubbed by his contemporaries as the "leading Scottish composer of his generation" [5, p. 7], Thomas Wilson (1927–2001) holds a very important place in the history of Scottish music in the second half of the twentieth century. However, his music has yet to be explored fully by musicologists and represents a broad field for exploration. Much information about various aspects of his life and music may be found in the biography written by his wife Margaret Wilson and David Griffith [7] and in a large archive of Thomas Wilson's correspondence, notes, critics' reviews etc. carefully collected by Margaret throughout their almost fifty years of marriage. Many of his works received detailed commentaries on the pages of essays written by musicologists, composers and performers, former colleagues, friends, and family, published in 2004 by the *Musica Scotica*.

Due to the fact that the medium of contemporary opera presents a topical issue of present-day musicology, this essay will focus on Thomas Wilson's operas. It will explore the connections between his opera *The Private Memoirs and The Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and the gothic novel of the same name by Scottish poet James Hogg. The author will identify the distinguishing traits of the gothic text and explore their impact on the dramaturgy and musical style of the opera.

According to Margaret Wilson, Thomas believed that music is a reflection of the lives we live and the environments we live in. He thought that it is a matter of high importance for a composer to be aware of his musical surrounding. Nevertheless, living in a century of great artistic innovations, his style remained relatively conservative. Being very much aware of contemporary music and of the various different stylistic factors and techniques as they appeared, he had never sought for innovation for its own sake. He found many modern composers too preoccupied with the qualities of structure and techniques rather than the question of the composition's final goal and expression. What the composer included in his musical arsenal had to be consistent with his style and approach and most importantly had to satisfy the purpose of every particular piece. The musical vocabulary of the twentieth century was organically combined with the one of the previous epochs forming his original distinctive voice.

His style developed throughout his life, influenced by a truly eclectic range of sources. Considerable impact in this process belongs to the icons of the early twentieth century – Anton Webern and Alban Berg. The aesthetics of expressionism represented in the works by members of the Second Viennese School appealed to Thomas Wilson. Friends of the composer often pointed out that of all European composers Berg was the closest to him in style and expressive force. The striking resemblance between the two composers is revealed most obviously in the mixture of tonal and atonal elements and deeply expressive and sensitive orchestral writing. Although Wilson's instrumental forces are far from lavish, he attains an astonishing variety of colors and textures. The dark undertones of Wilson's operatic pieces are characterized by themes and issues of expressionism, its deep interest in characters' inner lives and violent external and internal conflicts.

Although he had always been reputed as a composer of large-scale symphonic works, opera played an important role in his life. The two operas written by the composer, both commissioned by Scottish companies, made a significant contribution to nation's cultural output. Wilson's first venture into the operatic medium occurred in 1968 when BBC Scotland approached him with a commission to write one-act opera. *The Charcoal Burner* was recorded in March 1969 and broadcast on Radio 4. The libretto of the opera is based on a tragic story by John Walford, a charcoal burner from the Quantock Hills area of the West Country who was publicly executed in 1797 for the murder of his wife Jane Stovey. All the events are presented as a narrative of an unnamed poet, through which we can see the piteous effect they induced in his

mind and soul. The story reflects those principal features which the composer considered necessary for a good libretto – highly dramatic elements and demonstration of the contrasting oppositions of light and darkness, the best and worst in mankind. *The Charcoal Burner* received a warm reception from the critics, who agreed that the opera is "a major contribution to operatic literature" [7, p. 108]. After completing *The Charcoal Burner*, the composer claimed that he had reached another important point in his career as a composer. By tackling the hitherto untried genre Wilson expanded his musical vocabulary. These methods of working with librettos, operatic form, dramaturgy and other aspects of such a significant undertaking as writing an opera developed in his second big operatic project.

In the 1970s the Scottish Opera contacted four Scottish composers with a commission to each write an opera – Iain Hamilton (*The Cataline Conspiracy*), Robin Orr (*Weir of Hermiston*), Thea Musgrave (*Mary Queen of Scots*), and Thomas Wilson (*The Confessions of a Justified Sinner*). Three years later, in the York Theatre Royal at the York Festival on June 18, 1976 the world saw the first performance of the opera in three acts based on an extraordinary work by Scottish poet James Hogg *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). The opera remained the only full-length work in that genre by Thomas Wilson.

The composition of the opera absorbed the composer and developed into three years of obsession during which he faced and successfully resolved many difficulties. In order to cut down the costs and make the opera suitable for touring, the commission allowed only a chamber orchestra of forty-five musicians, three solo vocalists and a chorus of only twenty members. Such conditions became a significant challenge for Wilson, whose orchestral style was marked by an expanded use of large romantic orchestra. However, "he showed an outstanding ability to achieve the huge dynamic range, varied textures, and his characteristic orchestral voice in scoring which was effective in the large conventional theatres as well as the smaller and more restricted venues of the tour" [3, p. 18]. The orchestration of the opera is always lively and intensely vivid. The reinforced lower registers of the orchestra (alto flute, bass clarinet, contrabassoon, three trombones) have a direct impact on the gloomy gothic atmosphere. Although the opera "does not have a lot for the lover of good tunes" [6], its expressionist orchestral writing, as well as the vocalists' increasingly hysterical recitative-like declamation, carries within itself the unbearable tension of the opera's dramatic narrative. As the critics pointed out, "when musical points are as tellingly made as these, it seems hardly necessary to underline them visually" [Ibid.].

Wilson found the solutions for the other two difficulties – finding the right librettist and the appropriate text – in his close friend, the choral director of Scottish Opera John Currie. Currie had already worked with the composer on a few earlier compositions as a conductor and understood his music very well. He was the first to suggest adopting Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* for writing an opera. "For years I had been fascinated, perhaps because of an early religious background, with that strange and powerful novel by James Hogg – said Currie – and was surprised and delighted when Wilson was gripped by the work's dark undertones" [3, p. 17]. As Currie pointed out, one might have been surprised that the composer, "a Catholic, steeped in plainchant and, to the end of his life, the great liturgical texts, should have embraced a work with the Calvinistic doctrine of Predestination (or a Scottish distortion of it) as its central evil, and its title character an anti-hero" [Ibid.]. However, the gothic novel with its character-driven plot, strong muscular style of language in the vein of the King James Bible, complex psychological collisions and unexpected narrative twists perfectly coincide with his aesthetic interests. He "recognized in the Sinner a profound myth of good and evil which he was well equipped to present in operatic language" [Ibid.]. Besides, Wilson discovered a link between the novel and one of his favorite operas, Berg's *Wozzeck*, and often referred to it in the discussion of his work.

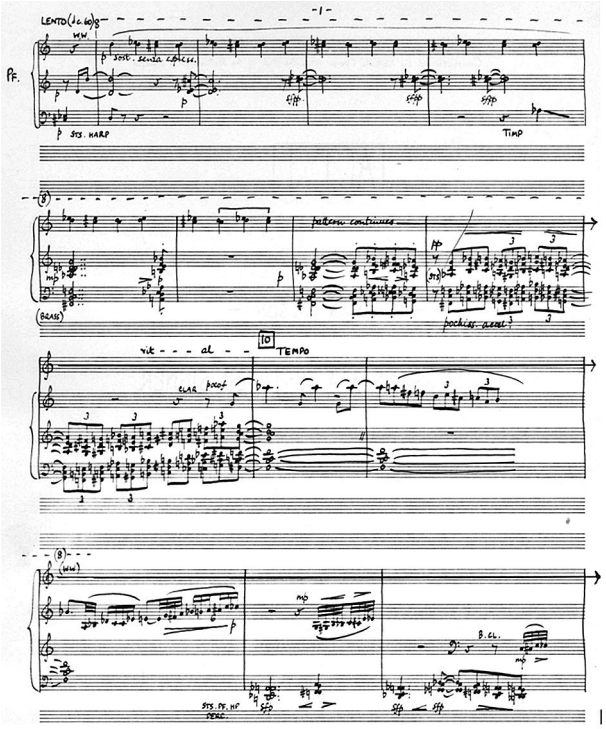
The genre of the gothic novel determined the stylistic features of the music of the opera as well as its production. Its distinguishing traits can be seen not only in the opera's dramaturgy but also in its original musical implementation. In order to clarify what the term *gothic* means it is useful to refer to the origins of the genre. It originated in England in the second half of the 18th century. The term is attributed to English author Horace Walpole, with his novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), subtitled in its second edition "A Gothic

Story". It emulated Gothic architecture, which appeared as a background of many of these stories. The Gothic is associated with "supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption" [1, p. 1]. Gothic plots vividly demonstrated criminal behavior; humans who are disturbed, alienated, divided from themselves, governed by their alter egos and no longer in control of their passions and desires, became its subjects.

To define the gothic characteristics of the opera it is necessary to identify the distinguishing traits of this genre. Professor of 19th-century literature John Bowen in his article *Gothic motifs* [2] says that despite the fact that there is no essential element which belongs to all gothic texts, there is a number of important characteristics they have in common. The first one to be named is steaming from the name of this genre. This type of texts usually have plots taking place among the gloomy castles with secret subterranean passageways, in stormy and desolate landscapes, ruins of old churches etc. The harsh, stern context of Scotland presents the appropriate frame for *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. The distant, marginal settings of the Scottish borders highlight the gothic effect of the story. Although music is aimed to reflect the internal psychological state of Robert (the sinner), it coincides very much with the dark and mysterious external atmosphere of the story. The interplay between the dull atmosphere of the old family house and the restless mind of the Sinner can be seen from the very beginning of the opera. The slow oscillation on the high flute and clarinet in the orchestral prelude, chromatically underlined by the strings and harp, the tonal ambiguity, as well as the dense and dissonant harmony create a feeling of discomfort and tension. The subsequent leaps of minor ninths and the clarinet "cadenza" will mark many of the heightened and agitated moments in the drama.

According to John Bowen, "the gothic world is fascinated by violent differences in power, and its stories are full of constraint, entrapment and forced actions" [2]. This sense of psychological threat and manipulation reveals in the relationship between the Sinner and his demonic alter ego, the mysterious apparition visible to nobody else, the "second-self" of the Sinner's split identity – Gil-Martin. While essentially being Satan in the guise of a beautiful young man possessed with

Example 1 T. Wilson. Confessions of a Justified Sinner. Act 1, Orchestral prelude



the ultimate desires for power and destruction, as many evil leaders are, he was endowed with great seductive powers. From his first entrance, Robert falls under the influence of this "figure of mystery, majesty, persuasive intellect, and, above all, beauty" [3, p. 23]. He uses Robert's beliefs and pre-existing tendencies in evil purposes, convincing him that it is his mission to "cut sinners off with the sword" [4].

The thematic area related to him is completely new in the opera in terms of its atmosphere. With a sudden change to vivid diatonicism, he ravishes the sinner with the music that reflects his beauty and plausibility. But to the degree that Gil-Martin's true identity becomes gradually more apparent, his music becomes less radiant. In the musical fragment describing how the first murder is committed, the lustrous harmony associated with Gil-Martin is changed into violent orchestral chords. Nonetheless, the thematic material of this musical episode is hardly new. The music of violently contrasting character is derived from the same source – the main thematic seed of the opera, the same way that the illusions and confusions of the Sinner's own characters are part of a single, albeit, shattered, personality. First, his music

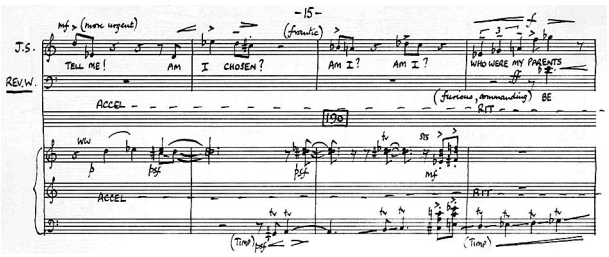
consists of a version of the dense and dissonant initial chord of many notes, repeated either in slow tempo or in aleatory passages in the prelude. Here it is played with all the dissonant harmonies removed. This thematic area is gently incorporated with the modal chorale from the beginning of the Act I.

Another characteristic feature of the gothic world is that it is "a world of doubt" [2]. The uncertainty that accompanies the gothic element is very typical of a world in which psychological disturbance and hallucinations, imagination and emotional affects utterly shatter the sense of reality; this is a characteristic trait of a world in which ambivalence and uncertainty obscure the boundaries of evil and vice. *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner* focuses on the same collisions of an individual psyche. As a metaphor for the distortions and doubts in the Sinner's mind, Wilson makes use of off-stage effects. This kind of device has been used by composers in psychological and symbolic ways in many operas[1]. For Thomas Wilson it is the domain of delusion, schizophrenia, madness, and uncertainty which reflect the Sinner's unsteady psychological state.

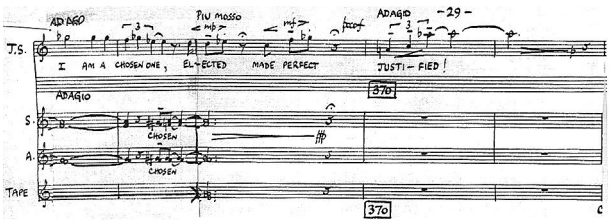
The "world of doubt" absorbs the Sinner from the very beginning of the opera. Scene 1 involves us into a family prayer, during which Reverend Wringhim ardently preaches the doctrine of Predestination. The central concept of this distorted version of the Calvinistic doctrine is that if you are among the chosen you can do no wrong, your place in Heaven is secured, no matter what you do on earth. Being overwhelmed with the key phrases associated with the doctrine ("predestinate", "first-born", "those who are called, those who are chosen", "numbered amongst the elect", etc.), Robert starts to question himself on whether he is the chosen one. This turns into an obsession for him. His questions and doubts are doubled by off-stage whispers – "first-born, sinner, second-born". They are also emphasized by a broad range of musical means of expression, such as the chromatic musical style, tonal ambiguity, and dense dissonant harmony. This feeling of uncertainty is conveyed through the intermittent agitated declamation of the vocal part of the Sinner. Its short melodic phrases with a descended shape and wide leaps demonstrate his tense emotional state.

After the Sinner is told of God's revelation that he is one of the Elect (Scene 2), his doubts

Example 2 T. Wilson. Confessions of a Justified Sinner. Act 1, Scene 1



Example 3 T. Wilson. Confessions of a Justified Sinner. Act 1, Scene 2



are temporarily replaced by joy. His vocal part broadens, acquires ascending melodic direction, with the inner-voices echoing the word "chosen."

Notwithstanding this, the overall atmosphere of the "monologue of a mind unhinged" [3, p. 21] does not change. The dark orchestral colors imply that his internal conflict is not exhausted and soon will overtake him with renewed vigor.

Much more examples demonstrating the influence of the gothic genre in Tomas Wilson's opera may be given, but already the aforementioned ones make it possible for us to conclude that the gothic motives of James Hogg's works had a considerable impact on the music of the opera. The dark atmosphere of the novel coincided perfectly with the composer's expressionistic aesthetics. His profound interest in the complex psychological collisions and desire to uncover the motives of a young man falling prey to distorted religious beliefs and crossing the line of sanity enabled Wilson to produce music that reaches beyond the emotional boundaries of mere stage action. The juxtaposition of the distinguishing traits of the gothic texts and their musical implementation demonstrate that the composer's penetration into the violent atmosphere of the novel predetermined many dramatic and stylistic features of the enchanting music of Thomas Wilson.

NOTES

[1] The use of off-stage effects can be found in *Jenufa* by Janacek (xylophone), *Savitri* by Holst (off-stage female chorus), and *Madama Butterfly* by Puccini (humming chorus).

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