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## **Franz Schubert and French Opera: Concerning the Problem of “The Native and the Foreign” in the Austrian Musical Theater of the First Third of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

The article is devoted to the connections of Franz Schubert's operatic works with the French musical theater of its time. These connections are stipulated by that significant position which was obtained in German-speaking lands during the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Schubert's works for the stage, just as in operas by other Austrian and German composers of that time, there are many features present which are characteristic of French genre models. The article examines, among other things, points of connection between two of his operas, “Alfonso und Estrella” and “Fierrabras” with “Semiramis” by Charles Simon Catel, which was staged in Viennese opera theaters, and which, as it is known, Schubert was fascinated with. This confluence is characterized, first of all, by the characteristic punctured rhythmical formulas, which in all three operas approach the functions of leitmotifs in their significance, some melodic turns and the specific harmonic progression bringing in the connection between the Aria of Azema from “Semiramis” with the Chorus of Florinda from “Fierrabras.” A certain amount of impact was also exerted by Catel's “Semiramis” on the libretto of “Alfonso und Estrella.” It is possible that one of the scenes of the latter opera – the conspiracy scene – was brought in the general outline of the subject under the influence of the French examples, moreover that particularly in the music of this scene one can discern the greatest amount of connections with the analogous episode in Catel's opera.

Keywords: Franz Schubert, Charles Simon Catel, Austrian opera, French opera, music of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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## **Ф. Шуберт и французская опера: к проблеме «своё-чужое» в австрийском музыкальном театре первой трети XIX века**

Статья посвящена связям оперного творчества Ф. Шуберта с французским музыкальным театром его времени. Эти связи обусловлены тем значением, которое театр приобрёл в немецкоязычных землях в первые два десятилетия XIX века. В шубертовских сценических опусах, как и в операх других австрийских и немецких композиторов того времени, можно найти множество черт, характерных для французских жанровых моделей. Среди прочего в статье рассмотрены точки соприкосновения двух его опер, «Альфонсо и Эстрелла» и «Фьеррабрас», с «Семирамидой» Ш. С. Кателя, которая ставилась на венских сценах и которой Шуберт, как известно, восхищался. Пересечения касаются прежде всего характерных пунктирных ритмических формул, которые во всех трёх операх по своему значению приближаются к лейтмотивам, некоторых мелодических оборотов, а также специфического гармонического оборота, объединяющего арию Аземы из «Семирамиды» и арию с хором Флоринды из «Фьеррабраса». Определённое воздействие «Семирамида» Кателя оказала также на либретто «Альфонсо и Эстреллы». Возможно, что одна из сцен последней оперы – сцена заговора – была введена в общую сюжетную канву под влиянием французского образца, тем более что именно в музыке этой сцены обнаруживается наибольшее количество пересечений с аналогичным эпизодом у Кателя.

Ключевые слова: Ф. Шуберт, Ш. С. Катель, австрийская опера, французская опера, музыка начала XIX века.

“Schubert and France” is probably a somewhat unexpected approach to the theme. In reality, if the comparison of the musical legacy of this composer with Italian music seems natural – at least because he studied with Salieri and wrote arias on Italian texts – it would seem that French music would not have exerted any considerable impact on him. Nonetheless, this impact did exist, and was, in fact, much greater than could have been expected. And this has to do not as much with the peculiarities of his biography as with his personal inclinations and the overall tendencies in the Austrian-German musical theater of that time.

It is well-known that the years of Schubert’s formation as a professional (the late 1800s and the first half of the 1810s) coincided with the sharpest decline of the interest of the Austrian audiences in Italian operas and the peak of the fashion towards the French variety. It is indicative that among the operatic performances the young composer attended prior to 1816 – and this is the year that Rossini’s operas began appearing on Viennese rostrums – there had not been a single Italian one. On the other hand, of the nine operas he had the chance to hear during that period, five were written directly for France<sup>1</sup>, while of the remaining four at least two demonstrate to one degree or other some closeness to the French tradition<sup>2</sup>.

The heightened interest in French opera on the part of the German and Austrian audiences [12, S. 316; 7, S. 86] spells out the musical-theatrical context in which Viennese composers of that time were compelled to work, and Schubert, obviously, was not an exception from the general rule. The impact of French theater can be observed in his operatic legacy in its most diverse manifestations – from the sources for the libretto and the motives of the subject to the musical topoi and models of the opera forms<sup>3</sup>.

Since these manifestations are overly numerous, let us focus our attention on only two kinds of them – reminiscence themes and musical ideas derived from French compositions<sup>4</sup>.

As it is known, the idea itself of recognizable thematic elements connected with particular situations or characters had first been developed in the domain of French musical theater. In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was perceived by German composers and in their compositions reminiscence themes turn into real leitmotifs. However, in Austrian opera the situation was somewhat different, and Schubert, similarly to many of his colleagues among his compatriots, was more inclined towards the French type<sup>5</sup>. In his music

these are indeed reminiscence themes – thematic arches, which connect scenes situated at a distance from each other. For example, in the first scene of the opera “Fierrabras” the entrance of Charlemagne is accompanied by ascending tiratas (see March and Chorus No. 13), which are repeated in the finale of Act 3, likewise highlighting his appearance on stage. Certain Schubert scholars consider this theme to be a leitmotif – either of the emperor himself or of his victories or of the Frankish knights in general [14, p. 500–501; 13, S. 103], however, in my opinion, the meaning of this theme is too vague for a real leitmotif.

The same may also be said about the more or less regularly repeated thematic elements which scholars find in his two large operas: they may be labeled as leitmotifs only with great extension. This is also testified by the lack of consensus among the researchers themselves in the interpretation of the depiction of one character of the plot or another by means of these themes.

Thus, for example, the motive with the dotted rhythm ♪♪.♪|♪, appearing in the opera “Alfonso and Estrella” and, incidentally, not possessing a fixedly attached melodic contour, is interpreted as pertaining either to the character of Alfonso, the son of the deposed king Froila [11, p. 218] or to the depiction of his antagonist Adolfo [14, p. 491] (see Examples No. 2 b, c, e, f). A similar motive also appears in “Fierrabras,” which it is customary to correlate in this opera either with the image of the principal character, the Moorish prince, or, in general, with the Moors [14, p. 497–499; 11, p. 260; 13, S. 101] (see Examples No. 1 a, 1 b<sup>6</sup>).

Example 1a Schubert. “Fierrabras,”  
Ensemble (No. 4), mm. 115–117



Example 1b Schubert. “Fierrabras,”  
Recitative, Chorus  
and Ensemble (No. 8), mm. 15–17



However, some researchers indicate, and rightly so, that such motives with dotted rhythms may also be found in many other compositions by Schubert, and that their implementation simply has to do with the composer’s predilections [3, p. 123; 13, S. 102]. And, indeed, this rhythmic pattern appears

oftentimes not only in his other operas, but also in his songs, where some of its modifications obtain the meaning of musical topoi. At the same time, the specific features of its use in “Alfonso und Estrella” and “Fierrabras,” as it seems, may have roots in French opera – at that, in quite concrete examples of it.







On May 19, 1819 in a letter to one of his friends, Anselm Hüttenbrenner, Schubert wrote the following: “in the near future there will be a performance of Catel’s ‘Semiramis’ with its endlessly beautiful music” [6, S. 27]. We have no other testimony of the composer being familiar with this opera, however, the evaluation which Schubert gives to Catel’s music bears witness to the fact that, first, by that time he knew the music (either saw it on stage<sup>7</sup> or in some way or other obtained access to the score), and, second, that he esteemed it very highly. And it is particularly in “Semiramis” a noticeable role is played by that very rhythmic formula, about the significance of which in Schubert’s two large operas researchers never tire debating.

The introduction is built upon it – namely, the aria with the chorus of one of its main heroines, Babylonian princes Azema, while subsequently it appears as a reminiscence in another aria of the same opera – in the Second Act. This appearance could be considered to be accidental, if in the same aria we would not find fragments of another theme from the introduction. Most importantly, in both cases the dotted rhythmic pattern is connected with the mention in the text of Arzace, Semiramis’s unrecognized son who achieved victories as a military commander. And since each time the narrative recounts his military glory, the rhythmic formula with the dotted rhythm may be interpreted very concretely – as a symbol of military prowess.

It is indicative that it is particularly this meaning which unifies virtually all the cases of appearance of this leit-rhythm in Schubert’s grand operas: Adolfo is a military commander, who achieved many victories, Alfonso is a young hero who is waiting to win his final battle, while Fierrabras is a Moorish knight captured by the Franks, who prior to that had demonstrated wonders of bravery in battle. The table below (Example 2) presents a comparison of analogous motives from “Semiramis” and “Alfonso und Estrella.”



Example 2

Analogous motives in “Semiramis” and “Alfonso und Estrella”

Charles-Simon Catel. “Semiramis”	
2 a. Act 1. Aria of Azema with Chorus, mm. 1–2	2 d. Act 2. Aria of Azema, mm. 32–34
Violin I 	Flute 
Franz Schubert. “Alfonso und Estrella”	
2 b. No. 2. Aria of Froila, mm. 80–82	2 e. No. 8. Recitative and Aria of Adolfo, mm. 1–3
Viola <i>cresc.</i> 	Flute 
2 c. Solo of Adolfo from the Conspiracy Scene (No. 17. Chorus and Ensemble), mm. 1–2	2 f. No. 10. Finale of Act 1, Arioso of Adolfo, mm. 61–63
Fag., Vic., Basso 	Violin I 

This can hardly be called a chance coincidence, moreover, because it has to do not only with Azema’s part. Catel’s opera, just as Schubert’s “Alfonso und Estrella,” contains a conspiracy scene, in which this rhythmic formula appears, as well. The situation itself in both cases is similar: the plot is organized by an antagonist striving for power and claiming the hand of the princess who previously rejected him (Assur in Catel’s opera, Adolfo in Schubert’s opera), who aims to achieve his ends by means of violence. In addition to both operas having choruses of conspirators, they also feature solos by the antagonists, in which the motive with the dotted rhythm predominates. Even the phrases of the vocal parts in both cases are constructed similarly, more or less beginning with the same formula: in Catel’s opera the phrase takes up four measures, while in Schubert’s work it is two measures long, but, at that, they are almost identical – in the second case they are merely notated in smaller rhythmic values in the same time signature of 4/4 (Examples 3 a, 3 b).

It is quite probable that the conspiracy scene in the opera “Alfonso und Estrella” owes its existence to Catel’s “Semiramis.” Its libretto was created almost simultaneously by one of Schubert’s closest friends, Franz von Schober, in his own words “in very great innocence of heart and mind<sup>8</sup>.” Schober was not a professional librettist and, not having any experience in this genre, most likely, based himself on operas familiar to both young men – including “Semiramis,” which Schubert was fond of.

<p>Example 3 a. Charles-Simon Catel. “Semiramis,” the Conspiracy Scene, solo of Assur, mm. 118–121</p>	
<p>Example 3 b. Franz Schubert. “Alfonso und Estrella,” solo of Adolfo from the Conspiracy Scene (No. 17), mm. 2–4</p>	

This is also demonstrated by other coincidences in the musical setting of the conspiracy scenes: in the accompaniment of the chorus in Catel’s opera there are staccatos in the low strings and bassoons, while in Schubert’s opera they are present in the cellos and contrabasses; in solo episodes have comparable textures in the strings (Example 4); comparable intonations – in particular, the reliance on the auxiliary second interval (Example 5); even the tempo indication coincides – *Allegro assai* (of the entire chorus in Catel, in Adolfo’s solo in Schubert).

Example 4 a Charles-Simon Catel. “Semiramis,” Conspiracy Scene, Solo of Assur, mm. 118–121



Example 4 b Franz Schubert. “Alfonso und Estrella,” Conspiracy Scene, solo of Adolfo from No. 17, mm. 2–4



Example 5 a Charles-Simon Catel. “Semiramis,” Act III, Conspiracy Scene, chorus of the conspirators, mm. 4–5



Example 5 b Franz Schubert. “Alfonso und Estrella,” Chorus of the conspirators, mm. 173–175



Example 5 c Franz Schubert. “Alfonso und Estrella,” Conspiracy scene, Recitative of Adolfo, mm. 202–203



Another coincidence, most likely, likewise not an accidental one, may be found between the initial phrase of Assur’s solo in the conspirators’ chorus and the very beginning phrase in the second duo of Adolfo and Estrella in Act III of Schubert’s opera (notwithstanding the different metro-rhythmical and tonal conditions, the similarity is sufficiently apparent, see Examples No. 6 a, 6 b). Incidentally, some researchers consider this phrase in “Alfonso und Estrella” to feature the same leitmotif, albeit sounding in augmentation [14, p. 496].

Example 6 a Charles-Simon Catel. “Semiramis,” Conspiracy Scene, solo of Assur, mm. 110–113



Example 6 b Franz Schubert. “Alfonso und Estrella,” Duo of Adolfo and Estrella (No. 25), mm. 1–3



The effects of the impact of “Semiramis” are also perceptible in other operas by Schubert. The most interesting example, in our opinion, is provided



by the cross-connections between the aforementioned Aria of Azema from Act II of “Semiramis” and the Aria of Florinda with the chorus from “Fierrabras.”

The coda of the last of the mentioned arias makes use of a harmonic idea, obviously picked up from Catel. The similarity between these two chord progressions demonstrated in Table 1 is absolutely apparent and is confirmed by the coincidence of the points of reference of the melodic line (see Example 7; at that, in Schubert’s case, this melodic line is considerably more expressive and richer<sup>9</sup>). Only the beginning and the end differ. And these differences are quite exemplary. In Catel the rhythm of the harmonic changes is concisely allocated in spans of half-measures. In contrast to this, Schubert “stalls” on the harmony of  $D_7$  for two measures, constantly alternating V and  $VI_b$  in the melody, and this enhances the strong emotional impression from the unexpected resolution<sup>10</sup>.

The endings differ considerably, as well. Catel simply fortifies the  $III_b$  by means of a perfect authentic cadence. In contrast to this, Schubert interrupts this cadence by a deviation into scale degree VI, which unexpectedly turns out to be in major, thereby returning us to the initial F major.

These changes, fortified by a constant balance between the parallel major and minor tonic keys, bring into the Aria of Florinda that inimitable color, for which Schubert’s songs are celebrated.

Thereby, it turns out that the core of the nonstandard and seemingly purely Schubertian

**Table 1. Harmonic progressions in the Aria of Azema (“Semiramis”) and the Aria of Florinda with Chorus (“Fierrabras”)**

Charles-Simon Catel. “Semiramis,” Aria of Azema			
G dur	$S^5_3 - DDVII_7$	$III_b_6 = T_6 - S^5_3 - II_6 - K^6_4$	$D_7 - T$
F dur	$D7$	$III_b_6 = T_6 - II_6 - K^6_4$	$VII_7 (\rightarrow VI) = VII_7 (\rightarrow T)$
Franz Schubert. “Fierrabras,” Aria of Florinda with Chorus			

Example 7 a

Charles-Simon Catel. “Semiramis,” Act II, Aria of Azema, mm. 103–107

Example 7 b

Franz Schubert. “Fierrabras,” Act III, Aria of Florinda with Chorus (No. 21), mm. 66–71

harmonic progression has French roots, a fact which, nonetheless, in no way deprives the Aria of Florinda of its originality. Moreover, in contrast to Catel’s music, which is pleasant, but still mostly generic, this originality is perceived even more prominently. The same thing can also be said about other instances of interconnection with the score of “Semiramis”: Schubert always ends up being a head taller than his French contemporary, whose music he was so fascinated with. Borrowing ideas from other composers has always provided for him an impulse merely to expand the volume of his own creative energy – it is not perchance that both the conspiracy scene in “Alfonso und Estrella” and the Aria of Florinda in “Fierrabras,” admittedly, is among the best pages of these rarely performed operas.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Iphigénie en Tauride” by Christoph Willibald Gluck, “Jean de Paris” by François-Adrien Boieldieu, “Médée” by Luigi Cherubini, Gaspard Spontini’s “La vestale,” “Cendrillon” by Nicolo Isouard (the list of operas is cited from [2, p. 110]).

<sup>2</sup> “Fidelio” by Ludwig van Beethoven and “Die Schweizer Familie” by Joseph Weigel.

<sup>3</sup> Separate aspects of the theme of “Franz Schubert and French opera” are elucidated in such works as [14, p. 474–535; 10; 9] and others.



<sup>4</sup> It is known that various different musical impressions – including theatrical ones – exerted a noticeable influence on Schubert's music (see, for example, [4, p. 125–137; 5]).

<sup>5</sup> The fact that this technique in Schubert's musical output can be traced directly to the French tradition is indicated, for example, by Wischusen [14, p. 482].

<sup>6</sup> The first example (1 a) is connected directly with *Fierrabras*, while the second (1 b) has to do with the appearance of the Moors on stage.

<sup>7</sup> Catel's "Semiramis" was performed on stage in Vienna from 1806 – first in the Theater an der Wien (until 1814 [1, S. 281]), and then from 1814 – at the Kärthnertheater [8, S. 328].

<sup>8</sup> Cit. from: [11. p. 211].

<sup>9</sup> Not least due to the change of the musical syntax in its correlation with the poetical text. While in the Aria of Azema the examined harmonic progression is contained within one vocal phrase, which corresponds to one verse in the text, in Schubert's case it appears on the boundary between two phrases, connecting the ending of the first and the beginning of the second verse and neutralizing the caesura between them.

<sup>10</sup> Concerning the role of median harmonic relationships in Schubert's music see [4, p. 138–145; 15, p. 122].

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