

From “jarring” Jarry to “pendent” Penderecki: Opera in a state of shock - A presentation of Krzysztof Penderecki’s opera *Ubu Rex*, after Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu roi*

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Abstract: An unprecedented theatrical scandal broke out in Paris, in 1896, on the opening night of *Ubu roi* by Alfred Jarry: Ubu, the grotesque protagonist, kills the King of an imaginary Poland and usurps the throne. The audience is shocked by the uttering of the opening line, “merdre” (“shite”) and by the author’s will to provoke.

Since *then*, *Ubu roi* has been considered the first avant-garde, uncompromising, revolutionary play, which later proved prophetic. During the 20th century, Ubu was incarnated by such terrifying personalities as Franco, Stalin, Hitler and other political leaders from the East European block. Hence, audiences and creators discovered in *Ubu roi* a subversive political allegory. After nearly a century, in 1972, Krzysztof Penderecki and his librettist, Jerzy Jarocki, create *Ubu Rex*, an opera based on Jarry’s play, the latter being censored by the Polish communist regime for being an “anti-Polish satire”. Penderecki’s project causes a violent political campaign and, for this reason, the opera’s creators have to wait for almost twenty years to see it staged. This *opera buffa* is finally produced for the first time in Munich in 1991. It is only after the fall of the regime that a staging takes place on Polish soil (Lodz, 1993).

In this paper we will examine the notion of shock – a characteristic of the avant-garde movement – and in what means Penderecki uses it in order to denounce the social and political conditions of his time. We will focus firstly on the libretto and the changes added by Jarocki in order to underline a commentary on communist and post-communist Poland. Secondly, we will present the experimental style in the music: a mixture of references to older musical styles and to his own compositions, a sort of mockery of both the classical forms, and those of the avant-garde.

“Merdre!” the French word for “shite” was the first word to be heard at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre on the opening night of *Ubu roi*, on 10 December 1896. A pandemonium was caused by the members of the audience that screamed and whistled for more than fifteen minutes. Jarry’s provocative play was like a bomb exploding in the hands of a bourgeois audience who was shocked by the uttering of such a word in public. Père Ubu, the main character of the play, owes his existence to Félix Hébert, Jarry’s physics teacher at the Rennes Lycée, whose vulgar, pompous and grotesque personality awakened the imagination of schoolboys. While making fun of him, the pupils created a new character out of him and gradually changed his name from Père Hébert to Ubu. The boys wrote crazy plays of his adventures, in which he relived Gil Blas and Don Quijote. Jarry collaborated with his fellow students on a production of a play, *Les Polonais*, in which Père Ebé suffered unspeakable tortures as king of an imaginary Poland. This was the first draft of *Ubu roi*, whose final version was completed and eventually staged in Paris, in 1896.

The plot is as follows: Père Ubu, the trusted aide-de-camp to the King of Poland is urged by his wife, Mère Ubu, to kill the King. The following day, Ubu massacres the royal family except for Prince Bougrebas. As King, his first actions are to exterminate the nobility, the judiciary and the bankers and to collect taxes. The Polish people are discontented with Ubu’s rule. Meanwhile, the Tsar, together with Prince Bougrebas who has managed to escape, launches a war of liberation. Ubu, forced to go to war by his wife, meets the Tsar in an inconclusive battle. Back at the Polish court, Prince Bougrebas ousts Mère Ubu and the couple is reunited in the wilderness. They finally manage to escape and sail to France, or Spain, and promise to continue their exploits.

Jarry made an attempt to liberate his work from the respected theatrical and literary heritage. Hence, the whole plot is taken mainly from *Macbeth*, with references to other Shakespearean plays in a sarcastic and mocking approach. For example, Ubu, like Macbeth, is tempted by his wife to kill the good king. The assassination is a parody of Brutus' plot against Julius Caesar, while Ubu reminds us of the obese, cowardly knight, Sir John Falstaff (*King Henry IV*). Other sources for parody are the writings of Victor Hugo, the melodramas of Sardou, academic treatises on philosophy and science, to name but a few. In this respect, Jarry ridicules the ideals of masterpieces of the past, cutting down heroic actions to burlesque and elevated sentiments to pastiche.

Moreover, the childish naivety, free use of language and irrational plot, the scatological obscenity, the presentation of characters as caricatures instead of men, the unconventional staging methods, as well as the gratuitous violence were elements designed to shock at the time when the play was presented. The author's will to provoke a bourgeois audience turning his back to the artistic and cultural values of past and present, the fact that the play was inspired by a school prank and not by political or sociological conviction make *Ubu roi* the first avant-garde play.

At first, Jarry's influence was negligible, but it was on the rise of the 20th century that it received attention. On one hand, avant-garde movements such as Cubism, Dada, Expressionism, Futurism, Surrealism and the Theatre of the Absurd were significantly influenced by the play. On the other hand, due to the rise of dictators such as Franco, Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini and various communist leaders, *Ubu roi* came to be considered as a subversive political allegory.

Penderecki became familiar with Jarry's play when he composed the music for a puppet performance for the Marionetteatern Stockholm, in 1964. During the 1960s, he was encouraged by the director of the Opera House in Munich to compose an opera using the subject of Jarry's controversial play. The composer, together with his librettist, Jerzy Jarocky, started working on it in 1972. It was going to take him, though, nearly twenty years to see it staged.

The reasons for this delay were political. The main reason was the location of the original play, Poland. This "legendary" and "dismembered"¹ country did not exist at the time Jarry wrote the play and, as the latter underlined in his opening speech, Poland meant «nowhere at all»². Despite the fact that the playwright had no intention of mocking the country, the play was banned in Poland during the Communist regime, as it was considered an anti-Polish satire.

As regards the opera, Penderecki gave more significance to the aforementioned location, using it in order to reveal a prophetic announcement of his country's history during the 20th century. It was, therefore, not a surprise that the opera was planned for production several times and cancelled in the end. In addition, a violent political and aesthetic campaign against Penderecki, as well as the political events in 1981³ and 1988⁴, provoked a further delay in its realisation. *Ubu Rex* finally premiered in Munich, at the Bavarian State Opera, in 1991, with a libretto in German. The title was the Latin translation of the original, because, as the composer later explained, this was the common form used in Poland⁵.

Concerning the libretto, it remains true to Jarry's play, being nonetheless a compact version of it: the five acts of the play give way to two acts in the opera. The creators have reassigned some speeches, especially in order to underline the point they want to make: give *Ubu Rex* an intentional and strong political dimension, which lacked in the original text. The first attack is against the communist regime. During the world premiere in Munich, in 1991, Ubu would shout at the Tsar calling him «Tartar», whereas in the libretto's first translation in Polish, in the 1990's, Ubu refers to the Tsar as «Komunista». A few years later, with the entrance of Poland in the free economy market, the libretto would change again: Ubu kills the king in order to introduce « a free-market economy ».

According to Maria Anna Harley: «The circumstances of the creation of Penderecki's *Ubu Rex* during the birth of Polish democracy allowed for an entirely different attitude to ideological and political matters. Penderecki's recourse to the text at the outset of a new, post-communist government and the creation of the framework for free-market economy and Western-style democracy (since 1989) may be seen as a political gesture of warning against Ubu-like impostors who attempt to wring the power from the old guard only to be destroyed by the age-old enemy, the Russians»⁶.

Apart from changes in the libretto, emphasis on the political dimension is also given by the producers: the post-Communist era is commented in the opera's revival in 2003, which coincides with the country's entrance to the European Union. The producer, Krzysztof Warlikowski, made a few significant changes in the staging. In the final scene the Ubus flee from Poland to find refuge in France, but in the stage set we see the Statue of Liberty, which makes us suppose that the Ubus will end up their journey in New York⁷. A dilemma is thus presented: is Poland finally gaining a democratic status or is it once again a prey in the hands of the Europeans, the Russians, and the Americans?

If Jarry's play shocked 19th-century Parisian audiences, Penderecki's opera caused a stir when it was presented, due to its unexpectedly sharp political comments. Another reason is the quality of the music which, according to Roderic Dunnett, causes nausea: «There's a nausea in the contrapuntal outbursts of the oafish plotters, or the mock-sleaze of the scattered jazz-cum-pop accompaniments, but that's the point: nauseating, repetitive mantras for a nauseating era. Opting for a hyperventilated, in-your-face approach, the Poles got it right - even if the 1990s score seems a throwback to the Sixties»⁸.

Penderecki very carefully classes it as an *opera buffa*. Cecilia Wee remarks that this genre distinction is significant: «The opera seeks to undermine both the heroic, moral resolution of drama and the principle of frequently occurring arias – important tenets for the conventional notion of *opera seria*.»⁹ But, Penderecki's work goes beyond the limitations set by this 18th-century genre, due to the confluence of varied and exuberant theatrical and musical gestures stemming from postmodernist aesthetics, as well as the surrealist tradition and the grotesque.

Penderecki seems to have adopted a pure Jarry-like style in the music. Not only is he parodying the musical language of classical forms, but those of the avant-garde, too. He even goes as far as to mock his own music. There have been some studies giving a detailed account of the various operatic and musical citations used by Penderecki in *Ubu Rex*¹⁰, the most complete one being Iwona Lindstedt's article «From Rossini to the Contemporary Avantgarde. The Interplay of conventions in Krzysztof Penderecki's *Ubu Rex*»¹¹. Bach, Mozart, Rossini, Verdi, Wagner, and Mussorgski are quoted directly and indirectly, fusing with Orthodox music and military fanfares, only to give a schizophrenic musical result. This «plundering» of the opera of the past, has been another reason for irritating the audience.

Nevertheless, this mixture of traditional *quodlibet* and modern *collage* create a new musical idiom which is closer to 20th-century postmodern aesthetics than the post-war musical avant-garde. Does this mean that we have to exclude *Ubu Rex* from the avant-garde? Besides, Penderecki turned his back to the movement in the early 1970s. It is very difficult to arrive at such a conclusion. On one hand, the boldness in the musical and vocal composition, the self-assured mockery of all kinds of music – including classical, avant-garde, and the composer's own creations – as well as the provocation in a political context, could make the opera fit into the avant-garde. On the other hand, the composer's dissociation with the movement is apparent in the opera's style: for instance, he juxtaposes both tonal and atonal elements. It seems that Penderecki's «untamed» opera cannot be easily fitted in any apparent movement or category without the danger of excluding some of the strong energetic qualities that characterise this work.

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¹ Alfred Jarry, « Autre présentation d'*Ubu roi*, parue sous le titre *Ubu roi*, dans la brochure-programme éditée par la revue La critique pour le Théâtre de l'œuvre et distribuée aux spectateurs, in *Tout Ubu*, (Paris : Librairie Générale Française, 1962), 22.

² «Quand à l'action, qui va commencer, elle se passe en Pologne, c'est-à-dire Nulle Part ». *Id.*, « Discours d'Alfred Jarry, prononcé à la première représentation d'*Ubu roi* au Théâtre de l'œuvre, le 1à décembre 1896, et publié en fac-similé autographe dans le tome XXI de *Vers en prose* (avril-mai-juin 1910)», in *Tout Ubu, op.cit.*, 21.

³ In 1981, Poland's military rulers declared a state of emergency after imposing martial law and placing leaders of the Solidarity trade union under arrest. The country was effectively isolated from the outside world since the military insisted the action was necessary to prevent a civil war.

⁴ In 1988, a massive wave of workers' strikes and street demonstrations broke out and continued throughout spring and summer, ending in early September of 1988. These actions shook the country's Communist regime.

⁵ According to an interview given by Penderecki in 1991. See John Rockzell, « Long-delayed Munich Premiere: 'Ubu Rex' from Penderecki », *The New York Times*, July 8 1991, Arts section.

⁶ Maria Anna, Harley, "Penderecki's *Ubu Rex* and Surrealism in Polish Music Theatre", in *Krzysztof Penderecki's music in the context of the 20th-century theatre: studies, essays and materials*, ed. Teresa Malecka (Kraków : Akademia Muzyczna, 1999), 227-237.

⁷ Peter, Conrad. "Baloneyland". *New Statesman*, May 10 2004, Culture section.

⁸ Roderic, Dunnett. "Ubu Rex". *The Independent*, April 29, 2004, Music section.

⁹ Cecilia, Wee. "London, Sadler's Wells: Penderecki's 'Ubu Rex' ". *Tempo*, 230 (2004): 55.

¹⁰ To name but a few: John, Warnaby. "Penderecki's *Ubu Rex*", *Tempo -New Series* 179 (1991):56-58, Cecilia, Wee. "London, Sadler's Wells: Penderecki's 'Ubu Rex'", *Tempo -New Series* 230 (2004):55-56 and Brigitte Cormier "Penderecki". <http://www.forumopera.com/archives.html>.

¹¹ Iwona, Lindstedt. "From Rossini to the Contemporary Avantgarde. The Interplay of conventions in Krzysztof Penderecki's *Ubu Rex*", in *Krzysztof Penderecki's in the context of 20th century music, op.cit.*, 211-225.