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The Room of Voices: Existential Confinement and the Dismantling of the Socialist Subject in First Albanian Modern Opera

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Abstract

This article proposes a holistic reading of first Albanian composition opera as a paradigmatic case of post-Cold War, postmodern opera at the intersection of musicology and the social sciences. Drawing on international opera studies the study situates Dhoma within broader debates on interdisciplinary, cultural history, and compositional technique. The work breaks decisively with Albanian socialist realism, both aesthetically and ideologically, by adopting a chromatic, serially oriented musical language closely tied to an existentialist libretto.

Methodologically, the article follows the structure of a holistic dissertation project: first, it outlines the theoretical framework for an interdisciplinary analysis of opera; second, it examines Dhoma's compositional strategies in the vocal and orchestral domains, with particular attention to flexible uses of dodecaphony and

Grundgestalt-like motivic processes; finally, it interprets the opera as a cultural artifact that articulates post-socialist subjectivity, anxiety, and confinement.

The argument advanced here is that Dhoma can be read simultaneously as a technical laboratory for dodecaphonic procedures, as a narrative of existential entrapment, and as a postmodern intervention into the history of Albanian opera. In this sense, the work exemplifies how contemporary opera requires an integrated methodology that combines detailed musical analysis with tools from cultural sociology, literary theory, and performance studies.

Keywords: *contemporary Albanian opera, operatic postmodernism, Albanian socialist realism, dodecaphony / serialism, existentialist libretto*

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Studies on the operatic genre in the international literature (the interweaving of musicology and the social sciences)

Opera has always occupied, in a manner at once awkward and fertile, the crossroads of several disciplines. As Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker¹ have argued “likewise, this genre cannot be reduced either to the musical score or to the literary libretto: it constitutes a “composite art” that demands simultaneous attention to sound, text, scenography, and audience reception”² Consequently, opera studies, when undertaken seriously, are by necessity interdisciplinary, given the very nature of the object they examine.

The most influential scholarships on this subject has articulated this thesis with particular clarity. Naomi André, for example (a US musicologist and scholar in music, gender, and race studies) demonstrates that issues of race and gender in opera can only be fully understood when scores and librettos are read in interaction with performance practices and their corresponding socio-historical contexts.³ Nicholas Till (a British scholar of opera and music theatre, professor at the University of Sussex, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies* and author of studies on the cultural history of opera and its relationship to critical theory) conceives opera as a performative event in which direction, scenography, and audience reception are just as constitutive of meaning as the written text itself.⁴ Linda Hutcheon (a Canadian literary theorist and scholar known for her work on postmodernism and opera, who treats opera as a cultural space for reflecting on death and the modern subject) goes even further, showing that opera often becomes a privileged medium for negotiating metaphysical questions about death, loss, and memory, thereby linking

¹ Carolyn Abbate is an American musicologist and professor at Harvard University, known for her influential contributions to the study of opera, the theory of musical narration, and the relationship between music, text, and stage. Roger Parker is a British musicologist specializing in nineteenth-century Italian opera, former professor at King's College London, and one of the leading scholars of the works of Verdi, Donizetti, and the cultural history of opera; together, they are co-authors of *A History of Opera*.

musical analysis with cultural theory and with philosophies of mortality.⁵

Jane Fulcher (a musicologist and distinguished professor associated with the “new cultural history of music,” a specialist in nineteenth- and twentieth-century French music and in the relationships between music, politics, and ideology), for her part, has called on musicologists to adopt a “new cultural history” approach, in which musical works are read within broader social, political, and symbolic structures rather than as autonomous artifacts.⁶

Thus, taking all this into account, the doctoral research dissertation on which this article is based takes these theoretical interventions seriously and extends them to the analysis of the opera *Dhoma*, the first work of its kind in this genre to be written in a contemporary post-socialist environment. The central methodological thesis is at once simple in formulation yet demanding in practice: opera must be treated as an inherently interdisciplinary object, in which musical technique, dramaturgy, visual concept, and socio-cultural context are interwoven into a dense and mutually dependent network. *Dhoma* provides a particularly compelling test case for such an approach, since its subject matter (existential imprisonment within a confined space) invites psychological, philosophical, and sociological readings, while its compositional language requires a high level of technical analytical engagement.

Albanian opera after socialist regime: breaking the framework

Within the history of Albanian opera, *Dhoma* represents a clear and self-conscious break with the previously dominant aesthetic model. For

² Cit. from Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera*

³ Naomi André, *Voicing Gender and Race in Opera*

⁴ Nicholas Till, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*

⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying*

⁶ Jane F. Fulcher, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the New Cultural History of Music*

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decades, traditional operatic production in Albania had been shaped by the aesthetics of socialist realism: a musical language grounded in stable tonality, a straightforward and transparent narrative, and an openly didactic and ideological function. In opposition to this paradigm, Ermir Dergjini's work subjects these expectations to a systematic process of deconstruction.

The work in question abandons diatonic-tonal syntax in favor of a highly chromatic, serially inclined language that is closely bound to the philosophical-existential horizon of the libretto. The libretto itself, directly influenced by existentialist thought, no longer constructs a heroic narrative of liberation but articulates a condition of psychological "imprisonment," in which the "room" is as much a mental as a physical space.

The text is based on Jean-Paul Sartre's¹ drama *No Exit* and depicts the way in which three deceased characters find themselves locked in a room in hell, without mirrors and without any possibility of escape. Gradually, they come to understand that no physical torture is required: they will torture one another endlessly through judgement, desire, shame, and mutual dependence. At its core, the work conveys Sartre's well-known idea that hell is other people; that is, the human being finds himself trapped within the gaze of others, but also within their own refusal to assume responsibility for their freedom and their choices.

In this context, serial technique functions as a means of articulating anxiety, cyclical rotation, and the impossibility of definitive resolution. The rupture with socialist realism is, consequently, twofold:

- On the musical plane, through the abandonment of functional tonality and the embrace of a dodecaphonic ethos;
- On the ideological plane, through the shift of focus toward individual consciousness,

ambiguity, and moral uncertainty, rather than a collective teleology.

This move aligns *Dhoma* with broader modernist and postmodernist tendencies of the twentieth century (Schoenberg's serialism, Berg's psychologically charged atonality, as well as later post-serial experiments), yet it does so from a specifically Albanian vantage point, marked by the historical experience of isolation and the turbulent transitions after the 1990s. It is precisely this double inscription (at once local and transnational) that renders the opera an exceptionally rich object both for musicological analysis and for research approaches within the social sciences.

Methodological premise – Technique as an independent analytical layer

One of the most important theoretical moves in this study is the decision to detach the analysis of compositional technique from the traditional segmentation of operatic form into acts, scenes, and numbers. Instead of treating each "number" as a self-sufficient unit, the analysis follows the internal logic of serial and motivic processes, which extend beyond classical formal boundaries.

Carl Dahlhaus has emphasized that compositional techniques are responsible for the internal cohesion of a musical work, regardless of its external formal configuration. Likewise, Theodor W. Adorno, in his writings on opera and new music, insists that music is not merely a support for text and stage action, but an autonomous bearer of intellectual and emotional content. Carolyn Abbate, in *A History of Opera*, similarly cautions that overly rigid structural schemata can obscure the ways in which technical procedures generate meanings that go beyond formal labels. In the same vein, Julian Johnson argues that the analysis of compositional

¹ **Jean-Paul Sartre** was a philosopher, writer, dramatist, and one of the central figures of French existentialism. He argued that the human being is "condemned to be free": there is no pre-given essence, but

rather we construct ourselves through our choices, and are therefore fully responsible for those choices and their consequences.

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technique often brings to light a musical “narrative” that traverses and exceeds conventional boundaries, carrying a carrying a significant philosophical weight².

Drawing on this contextual framework of perspectives from leading scholars and critics. in the field of opera studies, the analytical strategy I have adopted for this opera does not begin from traditional formal divisions, but from three interrelated levels:

1. The vocal lines, examined as linear projections of serial and motivic processes.
2. The orchestral fabric, studied as a stratified field of dodecaphonic series, partial rows, and textural techniques.
3. The vertical sonorities, treated as an autonomous dimension of harmonic and coloristic organization.

This threefold division makes it possible to observe how the technical “skeleton” of the opera supports its dramaturgical and psychological content, rather than assuming a priori that form is what explains technique.

Intersubjectivity, power, and social roles: a psychosocial analysis of the characters

The opera in question can be read as a miniature social laboratory, in which four individuals are placed within an enclosed space and forced to confront both themselves and one another. The “room” is transformed into a micro social model of hell, where relationships, gazes, guilt, and social expectations generate suffering more efficiently than any form of physical torture.

In other words, instead of flames and demons (as one might expect in a traditional imagination of hell), what is presented is a system of relationships: isolation, the absence of personal belongings, the absence of a mirror, the presence of a cold and impersonal servant, and three other individuals (the entire plot thus revolves around these four characters) locked into an endless game of surveillance, judgement, and self-justification. This shifts the operatic work away from a conventional “narrative”

toward a psychosocial study of guilt, identity, freedom, and structural constraints.

Garsen is the fractured axis of this universe: stripped of his social attributes and terrified by the lack of any “mirror,” he is forced to confront his own cowardice, the failure of the traditional masculine model, and his moral fragility. For him, “hell” is the impossibility of controlling the way he is seen, a radical fall from the role of the “strong,” self-legitimizing man. At the opposite pole stands the Servant, a cold bureaucratic functionary who applies rules without explanation and embodies an anonymous system that administers bodies and destinies while remaining entirely indifferent to the inner world.

Inesi enters as a lucid, aggressive female subject, devoid of false guilt: she rejects the status of victim, embraces cruelty and manipulative capacity, and exposes the hypocrisy of gender norms. In contrast, Estela is crushed by the pressure of social image: haunted by guilt, she clings to the façade of the perfect mother and wife, while internally experiencing shame and self-contempt.

Taken together, these characters testify that hell is not a place, but a structure of relationships in which people become instruments of torture for one another.

Orchestral serialism and textual space

If the voices carry the psychological narrative directly, the orchestra creates the environment (both acoustic and symbolic) within which that narrative unfolds. In the case at hand, and especially in the opening moments of the work, analytical attention focuses primarily on the string instruments, where complete series and compositional techniques based on partial twelve-tone rows frequently intersect.

If one allows a brief parallel (linking music with the social sciences), this compositional technique can be read as an acoustic metaphor for the social complexity of late modernity: multiple rules and systems coexist, sometimes align, more often collide, yet nonetheless produce a coherent environment (even when it is

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profoundly dissonant). The “room” in this opera is not merely a physical space with four walls; it is transformed into a dense network of superimposed orders from which the characters cannot easily free themselves.

Existentialism, postmodernism, and cultural meaning

As noted above, the libretto of the opera *Dhoma* is powerfully grounded in explicitly existentialist motifs. The chromatic and serial musical language amplifies these themes precisely by avoiding traditional cadential closure and stable tonal centers. Harmony remains in a state of continuous tension; repetition does not bring resolution or repose, but instead deepens the sense of blockage and inner captivity.

From this perspective, the opera is closely aligned with the broader tendency of postmodern opera to question metanarratives and fixed identities. Rather than offering a linear narrative with clear moral conclusions, *Dhoma* exposes the fractured inner life of its protagonists.

As Hutcheon observes, opera possesses a particular capacity to stage death and crisis as spaces of cultural reflection; in this case, “death” is not only physical but profoundly existential – a death of certainty, of ideological comfort, and of the older socialist-realist subject.¹

At the same time, the work is deeply rooted in the specific contours of Albanian historical experience. The break with socialist realism, the appropriation of new compositional means, and the focus on interior psychological space reflect broader social transformations after the 1990s: the shift from collectivist ideology to individual precariousness, and from cultural isolation to an abrupt and often disorienting encounter with global modernism. In this sense, *Dhoma* can be read as a sonic archive of post-socialist subjectivity, in which sound preserves the traces of the traumas, expectations, and ambivalences of this transitional period.

From a social-science perspective, the opera cannot be regarded merely as a formal musical experiment; rather, it appears as a narrative about the ways in which individuals experience structural change. Serial techniques, with their strict rules and deliberate violations, mirror the tension between inherited norms and the desire for personal autonomy. The confined stage space becomes a metaphor for the constraints of a society in transition, in which freedom is perceived simultaneously as potential and as impediment. Likewise, the fragmentation of the vocal lines reflects the fragmentation of identity itself: the post-socialist subject emerges as fractured, unsettled, and compelled to negotiate between ideological inheritance and the demand for self-determination within a new historical reality.

Personal conclusions: Toward a holistic theory of contemporary opera

This article has argued that this work, as the first contemporary operatic creation after the 1990s, clearly exemplifies both the necessity and the concrete outcome of a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to the study of contemporary opera. On the one hand, the work demands a rigorous technical reading: without close attention to serial procedures, motivic cells, and orchestral stratification, the core of Dergjin’s compositional mastery is lost. On the other hand, to stop at technique alone would amount to a kind of betrayal of the opera’s cultural and philosophical ambition. Only by integrating music theory with cultural history, philosophy, and performance studies does it become possible to understand what this work actually “says” about existence, history, and the condition of the post-socialist subject.

The case of *Dhoma* suggests several broader conclusions for opera studies and for the dialogue between musicology and the social sciences:

- *Serial technique* is not inherently cold or abstract; in the hands of composers such as

¹ Hutcheon, Linda, dhe Michael Hutcheon. *Opera: The Art of Dying*.

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Dergjini, it becomes a powerful expressive medium for articulating both psychological and social conflict.

- *Vocal lines* must be read as agents of narrative and subjectivity, not merely as carriers of text; their intervallic and rhythmic behavior encodes different modes of being in the world.

- *Orchestral textures* can be interpreted as sonic environments that reflect the complexity and opacity of modern social structures.

- Local histories have real weight: placing a postmodern Albanian opera in dialogue with international theory enriches both sides, showing that traditions often considered “peripheral” are capable of making central contributions to global debates on opera and modernity.

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