The Use and Function of the Folk Element in Weber's "Der Freischütz"

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Carl Maria von Weber was born in Eutin in 1786 and died in London in 1826. Besides being a composer he was a virtuoso pianist and conductor. As a composer he wrote much orchestral music, piano music, chamber music, songs, but principally operas. As a conductor, he introduced many French and Italian operas in Praga and Dresden.

His most important opera is *Der Freischütz*. It has a libretto by Friedrich Kind about the story *Der Freischütz* from the "Gespensterbuch" (Book of Ghosts) by August Apel and F. Laun. The story is based on a German legend, a folk tale, reflecting the simple life of the inhabitants of a German village, the forest, old superstitions, the supernatural, faith in the power of God, and the love between two simple people of the village.

In the 19th century some of the German literature dealt with old legends or fairy tales, where supernatural and mysticism are present. As in the literature of this time, the story of the opera Der Freischütz takes place in the Middle Age in a small village surrounded by the forest in the German mountains, immediately following the Thirty Years' War. The characters that take part in the plot are: Max, a young huntsman and "assistant gamekeeper"; Prince Ottokar; Cuno, the "chief gamekeeper" of the Prince; Agathe, the daughter of the "gamekeeper" and Max's love; Aennchen, a young relative of Agathe; Caspar, a huntsman and also "assistant gamekeeper"; Samiel, the "Black Huntsman" that is the Devil; Killian, a village man; the Hermit, hunters, bridesmaids, country people, and musicians. Max and Agathe are in love and want to marry. Cuno promised his daughter to Max if he won the shooting competition. Max was afraid he might loose the competition and consequently Agathe's hand because of bad luck that he was having lately. Caspar offered to help him in achieving his goals with magic bullets he could get from Samiel, the

Black Hunter, the Devil. Caspar had a pact with Samiel and getting free from it, he made an agreement in which Samiel will have Agathe's soul through Max. Max wins the competition but with his last shot hits Caspar who dies instead of Agathe. Through the intervention of the Hermit, Prince Ottokar reduced Max's sentence and allows him to marry Agathe after one year.

In *Der Freischütz* we find not only influences of Singspiel but also of Italian opera and the French comic opera. The story of a German legend is a characteristic of the Singspiel. At the same time the plot for *Der Freischütz* is a characteristic of the French opera comique plot in, which it has an idyllic situation (the love between Max and Agathe), the interference of external forces (Samiel demoniac power through Caspar), confrontation with the external force (the love of Max and Agathe and Agathe's innocence and pureness), and triumph over adversity. Besides this, the German Singspiel usage is found in the spoken dialogue and in some aria in the form of strophic song.

From the Italian opera we can find its influences in the scene and aria of Agathe (N° 8), in Act II, that is nothing more than a recitative aria. It is constituted by an accompanied recitative (*Wie nahte mir der Schlummer*), a melodic part (*Leise, leise*), another recitative (*O wie hell die goldnen Sternen*), the repetition of the melodic part with another strophe (*Zu dir wende ich die Hände*), another melodic section in "Andante" (*Alles pflegt schon längst der Ruhe*), recitative with an "Agitato" in the middle (*Nachtigall und Grille...*), and finally the aria (*Alle meine Pulse schlagen*). All these elements are united by the drama and combined as a whole. The character of Aennchen's personality has manifestations of the French comic opera, but despite this, the *romanze* and *arie* that she sings (N° 13 in Act III), shows characteristics and influences of the Italian opera – *bel canto* – with the coloratura texture of the voice. In the Act I N° 5, Caspar aria, we hear a typical Italian coloratura.

The use of melodrama technique, founded principally in the Wolf's Glen scene, a spoken dialogue and an accompanied recitative for intensifying the more dramatic sections, and an Entre-Acte in the Third Act are present in *Der Freischütz*. Besides these a big choir (remembering the *fêtes* of the French comic opera), a men choir, of the characters of the personages max and Aennchen, the sentimental melody of Max aria *Durch die Wälder* (N° 3 – Act I), the melodic line, shape, and character of Aennchen Ariette (N° 7 – Act II), and the plot, that has the same characteristics of the rescue-opera's plot, also present in this opera, show the great influence of the French opera in *Der Freischütz*.

Comparisons can be made directly with the French opera *Les Deux Journées* by Cherubini. Both operas have a great "amount of sentiment and adventure" and the intensity of the drama is not given by the spoken dialogue and scenes, but by the music itself. Weber performed this opera many times and was enchanted by the fullness of harmonic and orchestral treatment.¹

Les Deux Journées has a dramatic plot and Cherubini made use of musical effects by giving a new treatment and significance to the orchestra. He gave, principally, more feeling in the characters of the personages by using character motifs or recalling motifs, that is an insinuation of Leitmotif. Les Deux Journées is a folk opera, a rescueopera, therefore Cherubini also made use of melodrama, male voice choir, popular mass choir, popular music, strophic songs sounding like hymns for characterizing the common people, and the "hero" is a people's man. In Der Freischütz we can find all the elements cited above. With this, we can verify the influence that the French opera, the rescue-opera, and mainly Cherubini with his Les Deux Journées, had on Weber. In Der Freischütz, Weber used motives that characterized personages of the opera. Max is represented by the melodic line O dringt kein Strahl durch die Nächte played by the clarinet in the overture and sung by Max in the first Act, N° 3 – Scene, Waltz and Aria. (Ex. 1).

¹ Gaynor G. Jones. *Backgrounds and Themes of the operas of Carl Maria von Weber*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Cornell University (University Microfilms), 1972.

John Warrack. *Carl Maria von Weber*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Second Edition, 1976.

Phillip Spitts and John Warrack. Carl Maria von Weber. *New Grove Dictionary of Music, XX*, p. 241-264.

Ex.1:

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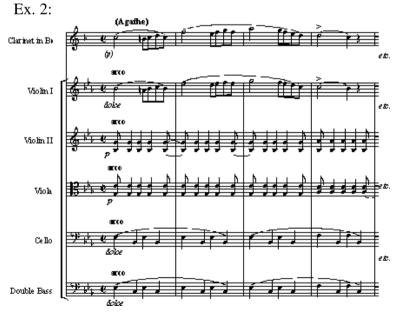
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Agathe has her recalling motif or character motif in the melody in *süss entzückt entgegen ihm* that she sings in the second scene of Act II – N° 8, Scene and Aria, and that also appears in the Overture played for the first time by the clarinet and first violin. (Ex. 2)



The diminished seventh chord and tritone are the recalling motif of Samiel. (Ex. 3)



The demoniac power is represented by the ascending scale of c minor (Ex. 4) and the appearance of the evil is symbolized by the melodic line originated by the arpeggio of c minor (Ex. 5).

Ex. 4:

Molto vivace.

Violin I Violin II Violin II Violin II Viola pp pp pp pp cresc. cresc. pp cresc. cresc. cresc. cresc. cresc. cresc. pp cresc. ppcresc.





Der Freischütz has elements of nature, hunting life, superstitions, country people, demonic power, religiosity, and folklore.

Nature and hunting life are together because both are correlated with the German forests with "benign" and "malefic" aspects. The nature is implied by the forest with the hunt in daylight and the maleficent, "terror" and anxiety in the night and by the simple life in the country. Max's aria (N° 3) *Durch die Wälder, durch die Auen* transmits all the harmony and beauty of the nature.

The elements of superstition together with the supernatural, demonic power, and the religious, are characteristics of the Middle Ages, principally in the country. For characterizing the demonic power, Weber used the diminished seventh chords. In Agathe's cavatine (Third Act) *Und ob die Wolke sie verhülle, die Sonne bleibt am Himmelszeit*, we hear the spirit of religion and the power of God being the supreme force over nature.

It is very clear that the use of folklore in *Der Freischütz* not only in the music but also in the character and representation of the spirit of the German country people. Weber absorbed the style of folk music and transferred it to his melodies. Some of the melodies used by Weber are really folk music, in which he gives a special treatment or by modifying the melodic line or by giving an elaborated orchestration. Other melodies are folk like songs composed by Weber in which he translates the popular and folkloric spirit well.

Without considering the overture, folk elements are found in the following parts of the opera:

First Act

 $N^\circ\ 1$ - Introduction

a) The chorus Victoria, der Meister soll leben

It is a folk-like song in four parts mixing the spirit of the village (Ex. 6) with the *fêtes* (Ex. 7) of the French rescue opera. The beat of 6/8 is what makes you feel the hunters' presence.

Ex. 6:





Ex. 7:





b) Bauern-Marsch

In conformity with August W. Jones, the *Bauern-March* comes from a village march that was very popular in Bohemia at the time that Weber was in Prague² (Ex. 8).



Village March

This march is played on the stage, its orchestration is simple and the harmony is basically constructed over Tonica and Dominant, with only one appearance of the Subdominant in its second part. The orchestration consists of a clarinet in C, a horn in G, a trumpet in C, a first and second violin, and a violoncello. The range of the instruments are very limited, there is not a contrast in dynamic, the melodic line is doubled in clarinet and first violin, and the accompaniment is very simple, principally the easy line of the violoncello. All these examples show that Weber wanted to transmit all the impression of a village band and the technical restrictions of its players performing a very easy, popular, and festive march. (Ex: 9).

² Quoted in John Warrack: *Carl Maria von Weber*. 2nd. Edition, p. 222 (1976) from "MMW, Vol. 2, p. 307 and in August Ambros: *Culturnbistorischen Bildern aus dem Musikleben der Gegenwart*, p. 47 (1865). Ambros suggests this folk march may in turn have been based on Mozart's in *La Clemenza di Tito*" and in Jones Gaynor Grey: *Backgrounds and Themes of the operas of Carl Maria von Weber*, p. 190 (1972).

Ex. 9:





Bauern Marsch

c) Killian song: Schau der Herr mich an als König!

It is a strophic song, a typical Weber's melodic line, with choral refrain. The final part of Kilian melody, principally the continuation in the choir refrain, sounds similar to a folk-like song (Ex. 10). Kilian, a village man, a common man, is teasing Max and is helped by the village people for doing this. The use of major second in the choir transmits the laughing of the inhabitants of the village during the popular *fête*.

Ex. 10:

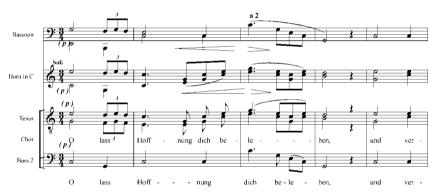


$N^{\circ} \ 2$ - Terzett mit Chor

a) Chorus: O lass Hoffnung dich beleben

The song begins with a three-voice male choir. Later in the repetition of the strophe, two female voices are introduced. Therefore, the three male voices are what give the characteristic of a folk-like song. Despite these characteristics, the song is originally composed by Weber. Its melodic shape and diatonic harmony, basically tonic and dominant, sounds like "student song" (Ex. 11). The male choir is a very old tradition in Germany and every small village has at least one. In this case, it represents the hunters of the village, even though it is sung not only by the hunters but by village people as well. The choir is very simple and, for reinforcing the idea of the hunters, there is a doubling of the voices in the two bassoons and, principally, the two horns.

Ex. 11:





b) Choir: Wir lassen die Hörner erschallen.

It is a folk-like melody sung by the hunter choir (Ex. 12). After five measures, the inhabitants' choir is added, singing basically the same melody but changing the tense of the verb, singing in the imperative referring to the hunters. It is in 6/8, a characteristic of hunter choir, with a three-part diatonic harmony. Weber wants to depict not only the mood of the country people but also the hunters. This he accomplishes by using, now, the four horns doubling, in part, the choir.

Ex. 12:



N° 3 - Scene, Walzer und Arie Walzer

Weber utilized the *Ländler*, a kind of Tyrolese, which was a dance very popular in all southern Germany in the 19^{th} century, to characterize both the spirit of the folk and popular melodies (Ex. 13). This melodic line appears in the Introduction - N° 1 at the end of the choir, before the *Tempo di Marcia - Bauern-Marsch*.





Its figuration is in sixteen note with a 6/8 rhythm and is played by the flutes and first violin in unison. This appearance indicates and anticipates the atmosphere of folk and popular dance. A description and characterization of this waltz is given by Gaynor G. Jones as follows: The ABA' form of this number, the accented first eighth of each measure of the melody which is announced by first violins and oboes (violins and flutes in the B section) and finally by violins alone, together with the typical waltz bass figure (heard in the second violins and violas in the A section and in the violoncellos and basses in the B section) and the repetition of similar melodic figures in the first violins give this piece the impression of a country dance played by rustic fiddlers.³

 N° 4 - Lied

Caspar song: Hier im irdischen Jammerthal

Weber used a two-parts strophic song of the traditional German *Lied*. It is a melody with three strophes with a very simple accompaniment. The second part of the *lied*, the first four measures, resembles as a folk like song (Ex. 14). In this part, the melody is very simple accompaniment without ornamentation and transmits Casper's hunter characteristics.



3 Backgrounds and Themes of the operas of Carl Maria von Weber, p. 191-192 (1972).

Second Act

 N° 7 - Ariette

Aennchen song: Kommt ein schlanker Bursch gegangen.

This is a polacca, originally an instrumental folk dance from Poland, with a melody in the vocal. Weber used this folkloric rhythm to give more grace to the personage of Aennchen. (Ex. 15).

Ex. 15:





Third Act

N° 14 - Volkslied

Choir of the Bridesmaids

This choir is divided in two parts, the solo and the refrain with an instrumental introduction. It is a strophic song in which the first part, the solo part, sounds as a folk-like tune. According to John Warrack, the second part, the choir refrain, is originated from a *Volkstanz, Der Windmüller* (Ex. 14). In its totality it sounds as a folk dance. The melody and accompaniment are very simple and the harmony builds over the tonic and dominant with only one use of the subdominant.



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Bridesmaids' Chorus

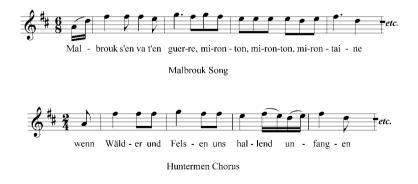
The hunter choir is a four-part male choir with simple diatonic harmony. The first part of the choir, *Was gleicht wohl auf Erden* ..., is a folk-like song (Ex. 17).

N° 15 - *Jägerchor* Was gleicht wohl auf Erden dem Jägervergnügen



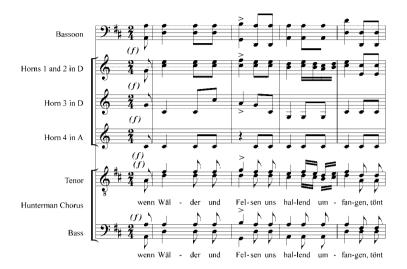
In conformity with John Warrack and Gaynor G. Jones, the second part, *wenn Wälder und Felsen uns hallend umfangen*, is derived from the melody *Malborough s'en va t'en guerre*⁴ (Ex. 18).

Ex. 18:



⁴ Gaynor G. Jones: *Backgrounds and Themes of the operas of Carl Maria von Weber*, p. 188-189 (1972).

John Warrack: Carl Maria von Weber. 2nd. Edition, p. 223 (1976).





The third part is a refrain in which four or eight soloists sing the melody while the choir sing a pedal in unison (Ex. 19). Neither one

nor the other group sing words but only the syllable "la". Again the horns are present doubling the voices.



This choir transmits all the happiness, emotions, characters, dance, of the *fêtes* because of the shot competition that happens in the small village. But the music does not transmit only the nature of the hunters but, also, of all the inhabitants of the village. The melody of the hunter choir is announced in the beginning of the third Act, n° 11 – Entre-acte.

The horns represent nature, the glade of the forest, and the hunting life but in this moment also the obscure places of the forest and the appearance of the evil, Samiel. Weber uses the horns in a different way to produce this new aspect of nature. The third and fourth horns play a G sharp (A flat) pedal note that leads to a third inversion diminished seventh chord built over B. The density of this horns effect reinforced by the use of the bassoons and bass trombone results in a dark sonority that reflects the darkness of the forest. Besides this there is a tritone between the bass trombone and the first horn (A flat - D) and in the fourth and second horns (B - F). The tritone was an interval that represented the evil (Ex. 20). To give a more propitious atmosphere, Weber used other recourses in the instrumentation, for example tremolo in the strings, timpani playing together with the pizzicato of the basses, etc.

Ex. 20:





etc

One important factor to consider is the key relationship in all the whole opera. *Der Freischütz* begins and ends in C major but the predominant key in all the opera is D major. Weber gave a specific key for characterizing each representation of power, mood, or nature. With this we have:

C major represents the benign power and the simplicity, pureness, and virtue of the countryman.

C minor is the representation of the supernatural and devilish power.

D minor symbolizes the huntsmen, the forest village life, and the happy and relaxed life of the village folk.

With this principle in mind Weber wrote Aennchen's arietta and the Bridesmaids in C major, the Bauern-March and Killian's song in G major, the choir of the village men in D major, and the huntsmen's choirs in D major and F major.

In conclusion, Weber composed *Der Freischütz* using elements of the folklore in a new way for achieving his goals, that was to compose a popular opera that carries the German romantic spirit. He gave expression and significance to the folklore or folklore spirit, as a way to transmit all the atmosphere and mood of the plot. For this, he gave more emphasis to the words through melodic lines, orchestral effects and orchestration. He used the brasses and woodwinds in a different manner, giving a new importance to these instruments, including as soloists, like the French horn and Clarinet. Weber exploits the range of the instruments and gave more importance to the middle voice of the orchestra. He made use of effects such as: *pizzicato*, tremolo, muted, *divisi* in the strings, etc for giving more drama and emotion and for transmitting more intensively the atmosphere and the plot of the opera.

Some writers expressed themselves as follows:

... But herein lay part of his [Weber] genius, in discovering a natural melody which brought folksong in to the realm of art *Der Freischütz* was not the first opera to reflect German feeling by actual use of folksong – many Singspiele drew upon it – but never before had folksong been so perfectly epitomized.¹

The use of a recalling theme emphasizes the importance which Weber placed on setting the scene and the folk-type elements.²

The ingredients of *Der Freischútz* are not new, yet Weber shows how to blend and distill them into a new creation. In his overtures, Weber certainly set the tone of the action to follow in far more complete a manner than did any of his predecessors. His technique of using leitmotifs and recalling themes has precedents, as did many of his orchestral and harmonic effects. But no one before *Der Freischütz* had so unified an opera through leitmotifs and tonality nor so well integrated the supernatural, musically and dramatically, into an operatic work. ³

⁵ John Warrack: Carl Maria von Weber. 2nd. Edition, p. 223 (1976).

⁶ Gaynor G. Jones: Weber's "Secondary Worlds": The later operas of Carl Maria von Weber, p. 197 (1976).

⁷ Ibid. *Backgrounds and Themes of the operas of Carl Maria von Weber*, p. 232 (1972).

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