

# MUSICAL PORTRAIT OF DORIAN GRAY IN OPERA BY ĽUBICA ČEKOVSKÁ

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**Abstract:** The present study is primarily concerned with identifying the means of characterisation of the characters in the Dorian Gray opera by composer Ľubica Čekovská and librettist Kate Pullinger. The first part of the study introduces the literary source of the Dorian Gray opera - the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by an Irish writer Oscar Wilde. It interprets the results of a comparison between the libretto of Dorian Gray and its literary source. The second part of the study is devoted to the characterization of the musical language and characters of the Dorian Gray opera. Ultimately, the study interprets the opera's focal theme – The Voices of the Painting.

**Keywords:** Dorian Gray, Ľubica Čekovská, opera

## 1 Introduction

The ever-present question of the beauty of the human body and its confrontation with the spiritual depravity of man is the theme of the book *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The timeless and familiar story targets the innermost human anxieties and deepest desires at the same time. The original work by the decadent<sup>1</sup> Irish poet and Victorian-era writer Oscar Wilde is a bleak novel about human vanity and the destruction of the human soul. One of the underlying themes of the work is the obsession with youth and beauty and the consequent fear of their gradual loss. It deals with the contradiction between the enjoyment of beauty and morality. The literary work *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains philosophical and aesthetic reflections on the power of art, which can uplift its author and recipient, but can also devastate them.<sup>2</sup> This variation of the Faustian legend<sup>3</sup> caused a scandal at the time of its publication and was condemned for elements of hedonism.<sup>4</sup>

On 8 and 9 November 2013, the Slovak National Theatre premiered an opera by Slovak composer Ľubica Čekovská. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appealed to her so much that she decided to treat the controversial topic as a musical drama.

## 2 Opera Dorian Gray

Dorian Gray, adapted by Slovak composer Ľubica Čekovská and librettist Kate Pullinger, is an opera in three acts, divided into sixteen scenes, written in English. The story, dealing with questions of the physical and spiritual forms of beauty and evil, is based on the duality of the interior and exterior, discussing the desire for eternal youth and beauty, the destruction of the human soul, vanity and greed. It draws inspiration from Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The hints of homosexuality and the "Faustian" selling out of the soul of the main character, longing for eternal beauty and youth, can be described as provocative positions, which largely depart from the traditional themes of Slovak opera.

The world premiere of Dorian Gray opera took place on 8 and 9 November 2013 in the historic building of the Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava as part of the international festival of

contemporary music *World New Music Days 2013* and the *Melos-Étos* festival. The production key of *Dorian Gray* was originally to be created by the well-known English director David Pountney, but he was unable to accept the offer due to work reasons. The work was finally staged by his wife Nicola Raab, who can be classified as a representative of the younger generation of internationally established opera creators. The musical direction was provided by Christopher Ward, an English conductor with a positive attitude towards contemporary music. The set and costumes for the opera production were designed by costume and set designers Alexandra Burgstaller and Anna Marie Legenstein. The composer originally wished for the character of Dorian Gray to be played by Slovak tenor Pavol Bršlík. However, due to his workload, he did not accept the offer and the main character was eventually played by an American tenor Eric Fennel and an Irish tenor Eamonn Mulhall.<sup>5</sup>

## 3 The musical language of opera

The Slovak National Theatre performs original Slovak operas only sporadically. This opera has therefore aroused all the more expectations. Fifteen reviewers from renowned national and international print and electronic media attended the two premiere performances of Dorian Gray.<sup>6</sup> The work has attracted the interest of critics and publicists working with The New York Times, Opera New London, Opernwelt, SITA and many other well-known media outlets.<sup>7</sup> After the premiere, the opera was also reviewed by the well-known reviewer Friedrich Reininghaus. According to him „...after a long time, Bratislava has been enriched by the work of a young artist who is composer-in-residence for a major German publishing house.“<sup>8</sup>

Although the process of rewriting the libretto caused the loss of some of the philosophical level of the original novel and a considerable part is saturated by the music. The musical component is built on contrasts of the simple and the complex, the beautiful and the decadent, the tonal and the atonal. The musical material of *Dorian Gray* opera is built monothematically; its basic characteristic is its variability - one can find several related musical themes in the score, with which the author works in different musical variations. The musical development of Dorian Gray moves from the conventional opening act to a more harmonically and rhythmically adventurous character and contrast. Within the first act, the composer employs clear orchestral scoring - long rhythmic values of consonant harmonies which, in their simplicity, may evoke in the listener an atmosphere of "aestheticism"; - an over-focus on external beauty, which gave rise to the portrait of Dorian. In the second and third acts, the music becomes more "active"; the composer employing more dissonance. The sonically sharpened dissonant intervals, the dark instrumentation of the orchestra, and the dark to aggressive vocal delivery of the protagonist, taking place in a variety of dynamic levels and expressions, are the main characteristics for the opera's finale. A prominent part of the compositional language, appearing throughout the opera, are the long, dense chordal harmonies of the upper third. George Loomis noted in The New York Times that „...Čekovská's style is lucid, gently dissonant, with lyrically profiled vocal lines highlighting the restless nature of Oscar Wilde's fictional work.“<sup>9</sup>

Given the scope of the work, we will list the most interesting musical moments of *Dorian Gray* opera. In terms of instrumentation, the opera is a chamber-like work; the instrumentation is organic and balanced. In some places the instrumentation lets the sung words ring out. At other times it is

<sup>1</sup> Decadence comes from the French word *décadence* – decline. It is an artistic movement from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. It finds its predilection in depicting or expressing moods of sadness, pessimism, scepticism, boredom, vanity and even contempt for life. It also exposes the most taboo topics, such as homosexuality or Satanism.

<sup>2</sup> MOJŽISOVÁ, Michaela: *Vyliečiť dušu vďaka svojím zmyslom a vďaka duši vyliečiť si zmysly*. [Online.] 2013, [cit. 2022-09-08]. Available on: <https://www.monoringdivadiei.sk/recenzie/recenzia/vyliecit-dusu-vdaka-svojimzmyslom-a-vdaka-dusi-vyliecit-si-zmysly/>

<sup>3</sup> The story of Doctor Faustus and his pact with the devil has been one of the most frequently treated themes in European literature since the 16th century. The prototype for the character of Doctor Faustus was Johann Georg Faust (1480-1540), a wandering alchemist who was rumoured to have conspired with the devil during his lifetime.

<sup>4</sup> Hedonism is a philosophical trend and ethical doctrine according to which the good things in life come from anything that gives people pleasure or relieves them of suffering.

<sup>5</sup> VONGREJ, Ľudovít: *Ľubica Čekovská: Dorian Gray je moja srdcová záležitosť*. [Online.] Portál Opera Slovakia 2013, [cit. 2017-11-18]. Available on: <https://operaslovakia.sk/lubica-cekovska-dorian-gray-je-moja-srdcova-zalezitost>

<sup>6</sup> EDITORI WEBNOVÍN: *Opera Dorian Gray od Ľubice Čekovskej zaujala aj svet*. [Online.] 2013, [cit. 2017-11-18]. Available on: <https://www.webnoviny.sk/opera-dorian-gray-od-lubice-cekovskej-zaujala-aj-svet>

<sup>7</sup> EDITORI WEBNOVÍN, c. d., 2013.

<sup>8</sup> EDITORI WEBNOVÍN, c. d., 2013.

<sup>9</sup> EDITORI WEBNOVÍN, c. d., 2013.

dramatically tense - it is rich in sound and colour, drawing the listener into the atmosphere of particular dramatic situations. Vocally, the opera is built on arias, duets, tercets and ensemble numbers. These are not numbered arias in the tradition of early opera, but rather recomposed sections with rich vocal variation. The tonal range of the vocal parts of the individual characters is within the natural range of the given voice fields. As Ľubica Čekovská stated in an interview for the magazine *Hudobný život*: „.... I tried very hard to make the opera interpretable. I sang the vocal parts myself; I also consulted them with my husband Sveťo. He gave me valuable advice about transitional tones and other specifics of the different voice fields.”<sup>10</sup>

However, the constant ending of vocal phrases on a high note can have a stereotypical effect on the listener. Interestingly, the individual vocal parts of the characters are often composed without orchestral accompaniment.

In terms of tectonic construction, the opera has an overcomposed structure. Instrumental intermezzi and two separate musical numbers, namely *Circus atonal* and *Dance of the Turkish Boy*, can also be found in the opera. These musical numbers, however, differ in their musical language from that of the opera; the author uses them as a signal of entry into the “low-budget” London theatre in which Sibyl Vane performs. Initially clear harmony and melody gradually graduate to clusters, glissandos and unnatural positions of individual instruments.

The English conductor Christopher Ward considers Ľubica Čekovská's musical language to be varied, very demanding, dramatic, and highly stylized.<sup>11</sup> Pavol Smolík states that „.... the composer makes rich use of symbolic statements and plot shortcuts, which resonate more and more in the gradually revealing message of the work - so that they keep the viewer's attention.”<sup>12</sup> In this sense, there are a number of interesting, often recurring moments in the score. One such moment, for example, is the ostinato, which the composer explains in terms of symbolism as follows: „*Ostinato is a metaphor for the anger that - precisely and persistently dosed - burrows under our skin until we accept it as truth. What's more, the work operates like a metronome counting down time.*”<sup>13</sup> Just as often one can find the interval  $d - g$ , which can be understood as a cryptogram of the title character's name.<sup>14</sup> Slovak critic Robert Bayer, in his article “*When Men Make Love, Women Are Helpless*” in the magazine *Hudobný život*, argues that „...Čekovská's composition, together with the conservatively retold libretto, is a dense, compact and superbly crafted contribution to contemporary music-drama writing.”

#### 4 Musico-psychological characterisation of Dorian Gray

The character of Dorian Gray as a dramatic operatic figure is essentially no different from his fictional antecedent. Therefore, we will now focus mainly on the musical characteristics of this hero.

As far as the vocal classification of Dorian Gray is concerned, the author has chosen tenor. This character is the most challenging character of the opera in terms of his vocal part. He does not leave the stage for almost the entire duration of the opera (about 2,5 hours). His vocal part is written in the range from  $e^1$  to  $his^2$ . The demanding nature of this part is confirmed by the fact that it is mostly on the notes from  $e^2$  to  $his^2$ . Thus, the performer hardly rests in the lower positions. His vocal part contains a varied range of presentational characteristics (*dolce*, *deliando*, *apenato*, *mestamente*, *tremendo*, *furioso*, *expressivo*

etc.). The ideal representative of Dorian Gray is the lyric-dramatic tenor.<sup>15</sup>

The first appearance of Dorian Gray takes place in the very first act and the very first scene. Musically, his arrival is handled as follows: when Dorian arrives, a short musical section is played, which may remind the listener of a fanfare (woodwind and brass instruments). Dynamics and rhythm are a prominent element here. This part can be understood as follows: a fanfare is a short musical piece that is most often played at important ceremonies. Fanfares are also heard when welcoming a distinguished visitor. In this case, the distinguished visitor is Dorian. The composer has thus enhanced the atmosphere of Dorian's arrival by using such a “fanfare”, which suggests to the listener from the beginning that Dorian is a personality who, over the course of the action, will acquire a great influence on the people around him.



Sheet music example 1: Music reminiscent of a fanfare<sup>16</sup>

Dorian comes across as a young man full of energy and good humour. He enters the studio, heads straight for the piano, while ignoring the painting. He announces to Basil that he longs to play the piano and no one will stop him. Dorian's opening words are: „*I am going to play the piano. I am longing to play the piano today. Basil, you can't stop me - I am playing the piano today!*”<sup>17</sup> Dorian's entrance is energetic. This part is quite vocal at this point, its dreamy melody, coupled with an accompaniment dominated by the clear sound of celesta and vibraphone, has an almost fairy-tale quality.

Then comes the contrast. Basil introduces Dorian to Lord Henry. It is clear that Dorian is impressed by his meeting with Henry, sparks fly immediately between them. While Dorian poses for Basil the painter, Lord Henry philosophizes about life. Dorian listens to him intently with wonder and admiration.

The music begins to take on a different character as soon as Dorian becomes acquainted with Lord Henry - for example, for the first time, a cluster is heard, which brings unease to the musical flow. From this point until Dorian expresses his longing for eternal youth and the beauty for which he will give his soul, the music is sometimes too simple - the vocal parts are even without orchestral accompaniment to better bring out the urgency of their content.

<sup>10</sup> MOJŽISOVÁ, Michaela: *Ľubica Čekovská: Pred operou som mala veľký rešpekt*. In: *Hudobný život*, 2013, Vol. 45, No. 12., p. 27 – 28.

<sup>11</sup> MOJŽISOVÁ, c. d., 2013, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> SMOLÍK, Pavol: *Ľubica Čekovská: Dorian Gray*. In: *Impulz. Revue pre modernú katolícku kultúru*. Vol. 9, 2013, iss. 3 – 4. [Online.] [Cit. 2020-03-04.] Available on: <http://www.impulzrevue.sk/article.php?1075>

<sup>13</sup> MOJŽISOVÁ, c. d., 2013, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> MOJŽISOVÁ, c. d., 2013, p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> Miriam Žiarna in her publication *Theory of Voice Education* (Ružomberok: Verbum, 2015, p. 105) characterises the tenor as a high male voice. (1) lyric ( $c - d^2$ ) – it has a bright light colour and light high notes, it is also very mobile. (2) Lyric-dramatic, spinto ( $H - h^2$ ) – she defines this type as a colourful voice with metallic highs. (3) Heroic, ( $H - c^3$ ) – is characterized by a wide midrange, full voicing with dark to baritone coloration, and intense high notes. (4) Comic, buffo – ( $c - a^2$ ) – has the smallest vocal range of all tenors, is slightly colored, and lighter. It is also very mobile and utilized in comic operas.

<sup>16</sup> ČEKOVSKÁ, Ľubica: *Dorian Gray*. [Score.] Basel: Bärenreiter Verlag, 2012, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> PULLINGER, Kate. *Dorian Gray. Libretto*. In: JAKUBEK, Slavomír a kol.: *Bulletin k inscenácii Dorian Gray*. Bratislava: DOLIS s. r. o. 2013, p. 15.



Sheet music example 2: Dorian's vocal parts without orchestral accompaniment<sup>18</sup>

At other times the music is dark again – dramatically tense, dissonant and melancholic. This can be seen as an effort by the composer to create a mysterious atmosphere, in the same way that Dorian is mysterious and unreadable. At the moment when Dorian offers his soul for eternal youth and beauty, *The Voices of the Portrait* echo, yet in their original, "pure" version.

The music ceases to be "mysterious" when Dorian learns of the suicide of his fiancée Sibyl Vane. From this moment on, Dorian Gray's vocal part becomes melancholic and is accompanied by dissonant harmony – in a deep position one can notice the ostinato repetition of the tone, which may evoke in the listener the aforementioned "metronome of time".

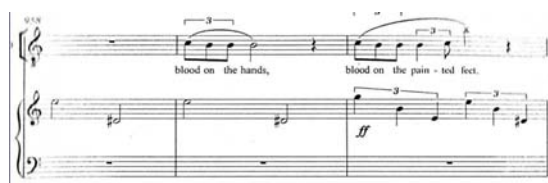


Sheet music example 3: Ostinato repeat of a note<sup>19</sup>

Dorian's vocal part repeatedly ends on a high note, which may evoke screams in the listener, caused by despair and hopelessness.

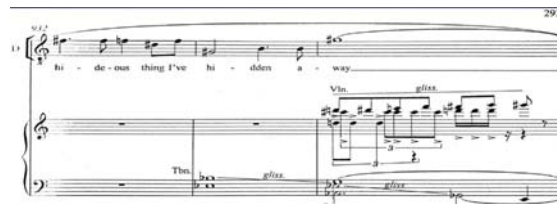
Dorian Gray's most dramatically tense performance takes place in scene 15, after the death of Alan Campbell. Dorian begins to realize his sins. He seems to genuinely regret them.

Dorian longs to start a new life. For the first time, he voices aloud that the painting is his conscience. It reflects in him every sin, every wrong he has done in his life. Full of determination, he decides to act. He is certain of what he must do – destroy his devastated portrait. He hopes that this will purify his soul, and even his words imply that he is willing to undergo public humiliation and shame. Čekovská has handled the moment of realization of sins, the desire for a new life and the subsequent death of Dorian in a thrilling way. From the moment when Dorian expresses that he wants to start a new life to the moment when he says of the painting, „Why have I kept it? I must destroy it”<sup>20</sup>, Dorian is accompanied only by the sound of the vibraphone and the harp (in some places the trills of the harp, elsewhere the repeating interval *e – dis2*). These instruments are particularly characteristic of the character of Sibyl in the opera. It can thus be understood as the author's intention to emphasize that the remorse of Sibyl's death haunts and torments him.



Sheet music example 4: Harp accompaniment<sup>21</sup>

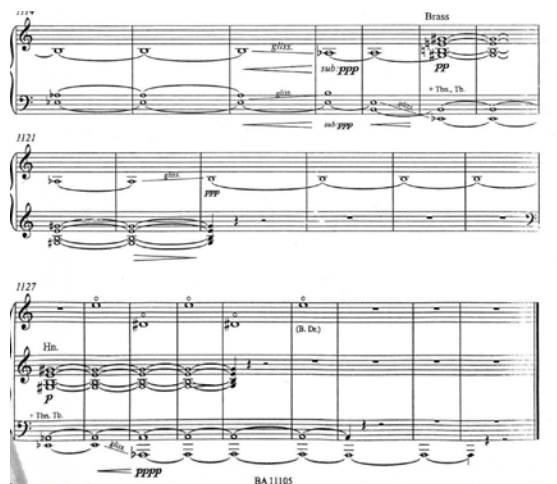
In places where the harp and vibraphone do not sound, the glissandos of the trombones do. At moments when Dorian sings a long note, the glissandos of the cellos appear throughout the bar.



Sheet music example 5: Trombone and cello glissandos<sup>22</sup>

It is the glissandos of the trombone and cellos that can have an almost demonic effect on the listener. Elsewhere, by contrast, Dorian's vocal parts are without orchestral accompaniment. This can be seen as the author's intention to emphasise that Dorian is truly alone at this point and experiencing great fear. The instrumentation begins to become sonically fuller from the utterance of Dorian's words „Why have I kept it? I must destroy it.”<sup>23</sup> At that point, the composer begins to use dense, dissonant chords of a higher third structure. Dorian's last words are „... and then I will be at peace.”<sup>24</sup> Dorian looks around the room and sees the knife with which he killed Basil. He stabs the painting. However, it is Dorian who screams and dies in agony.

In the final symphonic epilogue, the composer has used chords of higher thirds in the orchestra's tutti cast. Nevertheless, she only operates in *piano* (also *pp*, *ppp*, *pppp*). This may have its own symbolism: through such a moment, when the music reverberates in the piano, Čekovská leaves an open space for her audience to wonder whether the protagonist deserves “absolution”.



Sheet music Example 6: The final bars of the symphonic epilogue<sup>25</sup>

## 5 The Voices of the Portrait - Dorian Gray's leitmotif

What characterises Dorian Gray most is the reflection of his conscience, the so-called leitmotif and the central theme of the whole opera – *Voices of the Portrait* – which Ľubica Čekovská „... contributed to the modern shape of the production with an absolutely ingenious trick, namely the musical rendering of the *p* of Dorian, which she created by using boys' soprano voices.”<sup>26</sup> The theme shines through in the moments of the protagonist's confrontation with his portrait. As the protagonist's destruction progresses, the initially pure line takes on demonic forms of Dorian's sin-riddled soul.

<sup>22</sup> ČEKOVSÁ, c. d., 2012, s. 274.

<sup>23</sup> PULLINGER, Kate. *Dorian Gray. Libretto*. In: JAKUBEK, Slavomír a kol.: *Bulletin k inscenácii Dorian Gray*. Bratislava: DOLIS s. r. o. 2013, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> PULLINGER, Kate. *Dorian Gray. Libretto*. In: JAKUBEK, Slavomír a kol.: *Bulletin k inscenácii Dorian Gray*. Bratislava: DOLIS s. r. o. 2013, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> ČEKOVSÁ, c. d., 2012, s. 314.

<sup>26</sup> VONGREJ, Ľudovít: Svetová premiéra opery Dorian Gray Ľubice Čekovskej na javisku opery SND. [Online.] Portál Opera Slovakia, 2013, [cit. 2017-11-15] [Online.] Available on: <https://operaslovakia.sk/svetova-premiera-opery-dorian-gray-lubice-cekovskej-na-javisku-opery-snd/>

<sup>18</sup> ČEKOVSÁ, c. d., 2012, p. 84.

<sup>19</sup> ČEKOVSÁ, c. d., 2012, p. 91.

<sup>20</sup> PULLINGER, Kate. *Dorian Gray. Libretto*. In: JAKUBEK, Slavomír a kol.: *Bulletin k inscenácii Dorian Gray*. Bratislava: DOLIS s. r. o. 2013, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> ČEKOVSÁ, c. d., 2012, p. 256.

The theme does not sound during the opera as performed by the orchestra but is played from the score. Its original form was sung and recorded by the Bratislava Boys Choir. Variations of the theme were created electroacoustically in a studio in Paris. The theme was arranged into individual musical variations by Robert Rudolf, a personality of Slovak electroacoustic music and radio art. Robert Rudolf together with Ľubica Čekovská conducted detailed interviews prior to the actual work on the individual musical variations of the theme of *The Voices of the Portrait*. During these conversations, Čekovská's specific idea gradually crystallized, which was „... several sound preludes with the same theme and a gradual departure from their original form.“<sup>27</sup>

„From the very beginning I wanted the image to be mainly audible, so the Bratislava Boys Choir recorded a kind of voice for the portrait, which I later had modulated in an electroacoustic studio in Paris.“<sup>28</sup> said Čekovská. According to the words of Robert Rudolf, the artist's idea was not quite precisely defined at first. However, the composer refined her idea quite quickly and presented it in final notated form, along with sound recordings of the soloist and the boys' choir.

There were several complications during the recording of the boys' choir. The soloist started to mutate during the recording. Therefore, the authors had to resort to alternative solutions, such as attempting to replace the soloist and at the same time attempting to change the recording method. Rudolf states that „... the two sound files are independent of each other, and their length is edited, so they do not exactly correspond to the original notation.“ This implies that soloist and chorus were not recorded simultaneously. When comparing the notation of the theme and its final version, we find differences in the ratio of note lengths, i.e. in the rhythm.

When the recordings came into Robert Rudolf's hands, he stated that many more edits had to be made in order to ensure that they were of acceptable musical and technical quality. Rudolf said that it was necessary to correct the intonation of some places in the solo part as well as in the choral accompaniment. After presenting the results, the composer's choice fell on the specifically arranged solo of the boy soprano and the accompanying chorus as the basic sound material from which the musical variations, of the theme were derived.

In the literary premise, with each of Dorian's sins, a "blot" appears on the painting. The painting thus gradually begins to 'rot' and becomes increasingly ugly. The musical theme *The Voices of the Portrait* symbolizes the metaphor of the image. On stage, each one of Dorian's sins is reflected in the wording of the theme. With each sin, *The Voices of the Portrait* take on a more complicated form, culminating in the demonic wording.

The original theme consists of a 15-bar melody by the soloist of the boys' choir, complemented by the harmonic accompaniment of the other voices. The main melody is sung by the soprano written in the upper staff, the harmony voices in the lower staff are presented by the alto, under which the pure quartet is heard in the voice of the lower alto. In the last musical section of the theme, a four-part voice is heard. Formally, the theme can be divided into three musical sections: the first musical section presents the first six bars of the theme, the second musical section presents the next four bars, and the third musical section presents the last five bars. The first six bars of the theme are prescribed to be sung in piano. The main melody moves on the notes *cis*, *dis* and *eis*. A ligature is written on this section, indicating a melodic arc through the first five bars. The sixth bar merely reverberates in harmony. In the next four bars, the melody moves up a third and the dynamics graduate from mezzoforte to forte. The third musical section can be called the coda of the theme, and this is because the theme reverberates in it. The main theme of the hero of the opera is directed towards the central note of *cis*. In the coda, the last note of the melody is

a second of *es* to the prime of *cis*. This produces the following chord: in the lower alto *gis*, the alto *cis*, the lower soprano *cis*, and the melodic soprano voice dissonates with them with a second of *es* (*dis*). Dissonance also appears in the third line in the second bar as a dissonant consonance with the *g-d-es-c* and the soprano's *es*.



Sheet music Example 7: The Voices of the Portrait<sup>29</sup>

The development of *The Voices of the Portrait* theme is supported by dynamics. A vocal, clean and clear melody is heard in the piano, with consonant accompaniment from the lower voices in the first ten bars. Below the lower octave in the alto, a pure quart is heard – a consonant, plaintive interval, as pure and innocent as Dorian was at the beginning – a young aristocrat, a boy with a pure and innocent soul. The dynamic marking *piano* at this point may represent his inexperience and initial timidity. Then comes a sharply dissonant consonance in bar eleven, with the dynamic marking *sforzato* (accent, large accent), which may indicate the sharp character change Dorian is undergoing. Just as when a chord suddenly takes on a sharp dissonance from a plainchant sound, Dorian undergoes a character change very quickly and sharply. And that's only because he meets Lord Henry, who changes Dorian's entire mindset in a short period of time. Dorian started going to parties, hurting people, being mean to them, he even started murdering. Therefore, the dynamic label *sforzato* has its justification – a pure soul became a monster in a short while. In the coda of the theme, although consonance is first restored, the main melody ends dissonantly. One can look for symbolism in such a "detuning": Dorian has indeed purified the painting by realizing his sins and wanting to make amends by destroying the painting – hence the initial consonance in the last section. Dorian, however, dies ugly, old and repulsive.

The first musical variation is heard in Act One, Scene Five, when Sibyl, as a result of her unrequited love for Dorian, drinks poison and dies. Thus, the first 'stain' appears on Dorian's image – in the operatic case, within the theme of *The Voices of the Portrait*. In the first variation, Robert Rudolf worked exclusively with the solo voice, which underwent a "delay (PitchAcc) effect, different for each stereo channel and with the pitch of the sung note unchanged".<sup>30</sup> This means that the main melody is punctuated by imitations of the notes, which come on with different delays. The melody "wanders" in counterpoint to the original melodic voice and its "echoes". In the tangle of voices, the role of the chorus as a landmark is somewhat more prominent than in the original theme.<sup>31</sup> Robert Rudolf's aim was to create voices mutating the purity of Dorian Gray's thoughts and soul as the seductive voice of the "Erinyes",<sup>32</sup> which, however, do not yet have too much influence on the main character.

<sup>27</sup> RUDOLF, Robert: Communication per e-mail. [2020-03-30].

<sup>28</sup> URSÍNYOVÁ, Terézia: *O dualizme ľudskej prirodzenosti. Portál Opera Slovakia*. [Online.] 2013. [Cit. 2017-11-15.] Available on: <https://operaslovakia.sk/dorian-gray-dualizme-ludskej-prirodzenosti/>

<sup>29</sup> ČEKOVSÁ, c. d., 2012, s. 5.

<sup>30</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>31</sup> The double voice of the chorus, confirmed by a *cis* tone in the melodic soprano part, orients the melody of the theme to the tonal centre.

<sup>32</sup> In ancient Greek mythology, the Erinyes were goddesses of vengeance, handmaidens of Hades, the god of the underworld.

The second musical variation of *The Voices of the Portrait* occurs in Act One, Scene Six. Here Dorian learns of the suicide of his former fiancée, Sibyl Vane. In this variation, a „dynamic (presumably hand-operated) *Shift - GRM Tools*”<sup>33</sup> is added to the previous arrangements. In the second variation, Robert Rudolf again worked, „exclusively with the solo voice, so as to achieve *micro-tuning at the same time as filtering the sound*.”<sup>34</sup> The values of the delay effect varied only slightly. This first “detuning” hints at the doubts with which Dorian Gray is “grappling” - whether he is truly responsible for the death of Sibyl Vane.

The next “blot” on *The Voices of the Portrait* theme appears in Act Two, Scene Eight. Dorian Gray, along with Henry Wotton and Alan Campbell, enter the opium house. A typical bohemian life of gambling, alcohol and sex takes place there. Dorian offers two hundred pounds as ransom for four young men he wants to win for his own pleasure. Robert Rudolf writes that in the third variation „...alongside the effects already mentioned, more subdued but still present, a parallel transposed voice enters the scene seemingly following the melodic line of the theme. With its darker and at the same time unobtrusively indeterminate, almost sinusoidal timbre, it creates a kind of a shadow.”<sup>35</sup> In the opera’s audio recording, there are identifiable tones in the second phrase that, although they sound simultaneously with the notes of the soprano’s melody, are melodically unrelated to them and are “alien”; to the listener in terms of timbre. They are reminiscent of „neutral, electronically generated sound, timbral, devoid of the aliquot tones of the human voice - the sonic attribute of humanity”.<sup>36</sup> Technically, it is the interaction of several effects in the exact order of *Doubler and Morphoder - Waves, Harmony Engine - Antares*.

In the Act Two, Scene Nine, comes a huge breakthrough. Dorian kills his friend, the painter Basil, in an act of passion. Within this scene there are no less than two musical variations (numbers four and five) of *The Voices of the Painting* in fairly quick succession. During the fourth musical variation, Rudolf acknowledged the presence of the “shadow” from the previous variation of the theme and, along with it, brought to the fore the „...microtonal transposition [apparently a parallel voice transposed against the main voice at an interval of a maximum of one second] and delay [applied to the main voice] creating the aforementioned voice or rather a chorus of Erinyes.”<sup>37</sup> Between the almost - but not quite - identical tones of the main and parallel voices, strong shocks are produced. Whereas in the previous variations the sonically disturbing elements were less pronounced, the distortion of sound in the fourth variation can no longer be ignored.<sup>38</sup>

The multiple transpositions of the solo voice in the parallel voices are confirmed in the fifth variation, along with Dorian Gray’s bothersome journey. The deeper transposed “shadow” ceases to [apparently dynamically] fluctuate. It more firmly connects with the line of the original melody, replacing it to some extent.<sup>39</sup> The fact that this “shadow” absorbs the originally clear and pure melody has its symbolism: Henry Wotton’s influence has absorbed Dorian to the point where he has become a monster, capable even of murder. From a pure and immaculate soul, he becomes a soul increasingly tainted by sins - the very soul that can be understood as the aforementioned sonic “shadow”. As Rudolf states, the accompanying chorus recedes into the background, although it is still the “mainstay” of the melodic line at the beginning of the theme. Later on, the chorus is also subject to a “static realignment”.<sup>40</sup> We interpret this as its transposition throughout the duration of this variation. At this point, Dorian is no longer who he once was.

The sixth musical variation appears at the end of Act Two, Scene Ten. Dorian threatens Alan Campbell that if he does not dispose of Basil’s dead body, he will send a letter to the media about Alan’s scandalous past. Within this variation, there is a „significant turning point in the development of incremental change”.<sup>41</sup> The original solo voice undergoes changes: it fades into an “electronic envelope” and its basic colour also changes. The colour shift is intended by Rudolf to follow the development of the main character’s personality. The theme becomes less definite. The “detuning” along with the delay effect gradually moves into the foreground and the changes become more compact.<sup>42</sup> The effects “parasitize” on the fading tones of the original theme are now almost fully sonically emancipated.<sup>43</sup> They may symbolize Dorian’s sins, because of which his soul begins to “rot”. The original colouring of the boy soprano loses its timbral purity.<sup>44</sup> Dorian’s forcing Alan to remove Basil’s dead body is, within the plot of the opera, Dorian’s ultimate sin. Therefore, the initially clear theme is already almost indistinguishable to the listener at this point.

The seventh musical variation is heard in Act Three, Scene Thirteen. Dorian comes face to face with Sibyl’s brother, James, who, before his sister’s death, had sworn that if Dorian harmed her, he would kill him. However, because of his young-looking face, James doesn’t recognize Dorian and lets him go. However, “Brothelmama” subsequently reveals to him that Dorian has sold his soul to the devil, which is why he looks so young. The melodic line, in the words of Robert Rudolf, is completely lost under the accumulation of effects such as transposition, multiplication of voices, delay, etc., and these elements replace the original theme. The accompanying chorus is completely absent. In its place, a new element appears in the form of electronically generated whispers.<sup>45</sup> It can be seen as a harbinger of misfortune - Dorian is truly unhinged at this point. Gradually he becomes aware of the decay of his soul reflected in the painting. At the beginning of the variation we hear rising tones, evoking tension.<sup>46</sup> He senses that something terrifying is approaching and is extremely afraid. The whisper is both a substitute for the choral accompaniment and a colourful addition to the sound of the variation. At Čekovská’s request, however, Rudolf has suppressed this whisper into the background.<sup>47</sup>

The eighth musical variation is heard in Act Three, Scene Fourteen. Dorian is throwing a party in his house. It is clear that he does not want to be alone, for as he begins to become confused, fear takes hold of him. The colour of the sound changes, and through filtering it is stripped of the characteristic dimension of the human voice. The result is a half-electronic, half-human sound that, together with the aforementioned whisper, completes the transformation of Dorian Gray.<sup>48</sup> Dorian hallucinates - he hears the dead voice of Sibyl Vane. Screams echo from outside. The companion has killed James Vane, who was about to murder Dorian. Dorian begins to realize how many people have lost their lives because of him. A related mass of voices is clearing as the individual melodic lines gain independence. They follow quite independent directions.<sup>49</sup> The horrific sounds reaching the scene - as the melody suggests - “from different directions”, already remind us of the consequences of the protagonist’s actions, rather than a reflection of the protagonist’s inner self. Sliding glissandos from top to bottom sound uncoordinated in sharp highs and dark lows. Among the sounds, haphazardly evoking wailing, one, and a little later another, drawn-out note emerges at the end of the variation. Dorian is sure of what he is about to do.<sup>50</sup>

The last, ninth musical variation of *The Voices of the Portrait* is heard at the end of Act Three, Scene Fifteen. Before it even

<sup>33</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>34</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>35</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>36</sup> JESENIČOVÁ, Soňa: Communication per e-mail. [2020-04-20].

<sup>37</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>38</sup> JESENIČOVÁ, c. d., 2020.

<sup>39</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>40</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>41</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>42</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>43</sup> JESENIČOVÁ, c. d., 2020.

<sup>44</sup> JESENIČOVÁ, c. d., 2020.

<sup>45</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>46</sup> JESENIČOVÁ, c. d., 2020.

<sup>47</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>48</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>49</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>50</sup> JESENIČOVÁ, c. d., 2020.

sounds, Dorian stabs the painting. By stabbing the painting, he kills his past, but it is Dorian who dies. The slightly longer final variation introduces a new element to the process of gradual change, which is the electronically altered melody of the solo voice. This modification reduces the quality of the solo voice and the result is acoustic "parasites". The whisper reappears, and then the already electronically modified original melodic line comes to the fore again. At this stage, it „*duels with its previous transformations, transpositions and other elements of the process.*”<sup>51</sup> The disturbing acoustic elements that have been piled on top of the original theme in the course of the variations "diminish": dynamically, they become more and more in the background, and the original theme comes to the fore with increasing dynamics.<sup>52</sup>

In the literary prequel, with the death of Dorian, the image takes on its initial form. In the opera, after Dorian's death, the original, "pure" theme is heard for the last time. Dorian's stabbing cleanses the portrait distorted by his sins. At this point, the "magic" that has kept Dorian young and beautiful for so long has completely worn off. It is for this reason that the horrifying image of the painting is transferred to Dorian's very appearance. Thus, although the image is cleared by the reappearance of the original melody, Dorian dies as a repulsive and ugly old man. The last note of the melody of the theme is interrupted by the orchestra's powerful cluster of dynamics in *forte-fortissimo*. Such an overly "noisy" and dissonant ending to his life may mean that Dorian is unlikely to find peace even in death.

## 6 Conclusion

Aesthete and social critic Oscar Wilde is one of the most important decadent writers of the Victorian era. His only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, presents the theme of obsession with youth and beauty, as well as the theme of human vanity and the destruction of the human soul. It bears the hallmarks of Faustian themes. The story tells of the life pilgrimage of a man who allows himself to be seduced by a world full of fun, excitement and pleasure. For a wide range of artists, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has become a phenomenon that has been immortalized in many works of art.

The hero of the work under analysis is Dorian Gray. He is a young aristocrat, a gorgeous man who inherits his grandfather's house in one of London's preferred neighborhoods. He enters the action as a pure soul, a "tabula rasa". His encounter with Lord Henry, who exhorts him to a life of hedonism, proves fatal. The artist Basil Hallward paints a portrait of Dorian's face. Dorian, who recognizes himself in the portrait and realizes his beauty, expresses the wish that the portrait would age instead and he will remain forever young and beautiful. He offers his soul in return. His wish is granted, but it proves to be fatal to him. His every sin is reflected in the painting. The portrait turns into a rotten, sin-distorted image of Dorian's conscience. By stabbing the painting, he wants to destroy the portrait and be done with the past. The portrait clears, but the "magic" that has kept him young and beautiful for so long is lost, and the horrific image is transferred to the appearance of Dorian himself. He dies as an old, wrinkled man, with a repulsive face.

This work, timeless and still relevant today, is both a powerful message and a warning to today's population, which is obsessed with looking young and beautiful, wealth and carefree living. It comes as no surprise that Ľubica Čekovská was intrigued by *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and decided to adapt the theme for the theatre stage.

The *Dorian Gray* opera is the first Slovak opera composed by a woman. The work has attracted the interest of reviewers from renowned foreign print and electronic media, such as *The New York Times*, *Opera New London*, *Opernwelt* and others. Many of the reviewers claim that this work by an ambitious female artist has enriched the Slovak music scene.

Throughout the opera, the composer used musical themes based on a common musical foundation, which she worked with in various musical variations. In the first act, the composer composed clear harmony using long-sounding rhythmic values of consonant harmonies. Over the course of the second and third acts, the transparent harmony gradually graduates to clusters, sharp dissonance, glissandos, and unnatural instrument positions. Long, dense, chordal harmonies, mostly of the higher third structure, are a prominent part of the opera's overall compositional language. The opera's instrumentation is simple in places - often allowing the sung words to stand out with or without chamber orchestral accompaniment, but at other times it is dramatically intense - sonically colorful with a preponderance of wind instruments and loud percussion strikes. Throughout the opera, Čekovská employs ostinato repetition of tone - a metronomic pulsation that may evoke in the listener a metronome counting down the time until the fulfilment of tragic events: meaning multiple deaths of important characters. As the death of the protagonist approaches, the glissandos of trombones and cellos sound, which can have an ominous effect on the listener.

The musical-textual analysis of *Dorian Gray* opera concluded that the focus of its musical language is the fifteen-bar theme - the leitmotif of the protagonist (*The Voices of the Painting*). Whereas in the literary prequel the image of the painting changes with each of Dorian's sins, in the opera the composer used this musical theme and its transformations as a metaphor for the changing portrait. On stage, each of Dorian's sins thus manifests itself in the wording of the theme, which gradually "takes on" an increasingly complicated form with each sin, culminating in a demonic version full of glissandos.

The work does not contain numbered arias in the sense of the older operatic tradition. The individual musical numbers concentrate mainly on the character of Dorian Gray, who essentially does not leave the stage during the entire opera. His part is vocally demanding, containing a varied range of delivery, mostly ranging from *e*<sup>2</sup> to *his*<sup>2</sup>. The vocal parts of the opera's individual characters are often ended with a leap to a high note - specifically in escalated situations when the characters are desperate. Especially at the end of the opera, the composer of the music leaves particular parts of Dorian's vocal part without orchestral accompaniment, presumably to enhance the fact that he is left alone.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a theme often discussed by many composers. Yet the focus of the authors' attention is largely on the individual characters - the relationships between them seemingly unrelated to the protagonists' character. In constructing our methodology and in applying it, in the spirit of publications devoted to defining the concept of character, we have confirmed the assumption that the analysis of the relationships between characters is an important factor.

By analyzing the characters and the relationships between them, we concluded that individual operatic characters are identical to fictional characters. The opera's librettist, Kate Pullinger, has preserved the essence of the work, selecting the most significant moments and dramatic situations from it. She has thus created a compelling operatic plot. There are a few minor shifts in subject matter between the literary source and the opera's libretto, but these do not change the plot in any significant way. The significant change, however, is the conclusion of the story. Whereas in the literary prequel the plot ends with the servants finding Dorian Gray's dead, wrinkled body, in the libretto the maid Lady Leaf enters the cleaned empty room in which Dorian died. This scene brings a hint of hope. It is during this that Čekovská makes use of a colorful symphonic epilogue, using chords of a higher third structure. The piano dynamics at the end of the symphonic epilogue (also *pp*, *ppp*, *pppp*) and the reverberation of the chords can be seen as the composer's intention to leave the audience open to wonder whether Dorian deserves forgiveness.

<sup>51</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

<sup>52</sup> RUDOLF, c. d., 2020.

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