

At the Hawk's Well

A Theoretical and Practical Study about the Music in the Play

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Abstract: *William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) is a pillar of the so-called Irish Literary Revival. His work has influenced authors such as T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), among many others. He is best known for his poetry than for his dramaturgical texts, and above all, for having been awarded a literature Nobel Prize in 1923. Nonetheless, his work for the theatre has a great value, and it is now being rediscovered by artists from all around the world. The aim of this article is to visit part of that production, in order to write about and record the original music for the opening of At the Hawk's Well (1916). To achieve this goal, a theoretical research has been held covering texts and studies about the author, the play and its stage production; it was followed by a practical investigation that includes a search for rhythms, sounds, timbres and characteristic instruments, as well as the appropriate way to execute and record them in studio.*

Co-founder of the Abbey Theatre (1899), Yeats was, according to Augustine Martin (1935-1995), an author who dedicated himself to the costumes, the scenery, the music, the casting and all other elements of his productions. At first, he had his work turned to the tradition, to the medieval era, to the myths and Irish sagas. Nevertheless, at one point he realized that Ireland was very isolated and came to the conclusion that he needed to get closer to Europe, to get to know the French, the Spanish, the Greek, and especially the Russian drama. An idea that inspired him to translate Sophocles and stage it in Dublin.

In the early twentieth century, Yeats became interested in a stage without much scenery, which he calls the empty space, a term later adopted by Peter Brook (born in 1925). He was delighted when he met Edward Gordon Craig's work (1872-1966), and applied his ideas about scenery in a reenactment of the play *The Hour Glass* in 1911.

After this period, in 1913, Yeats met the great American poet and close friend of Eliot, Ezra Pound (1885-1972), who was his secretary at Stone Cottage, Sussex. During that period, Pound introduced Yeats to Noh through the writings of Ernest Fenollosa

(1853-1908). From this encounter, Yeats produced *Four Plays for Dancers*; *At the Hawk's Well* is the most representative of the four.

At the Hawk's Well is set in a secluded place in Ireland during its heroic age, where there is a well from which magical water bubbles and brings immortality to humans who drink it. Far away, the mythical hero Cuchulain hears about the well; wishing to become immortal, he travels through the seas to find it. The play starts when Cuchulain finally reaches the well, whose Guardian is a *Hawk-like Woman* of dry and stony eyes. He meets an old man who unsuccessfully attempts to make him go away. However, Cuchulain tries to convince him that they can drink from the magical water together. The old man says that over the last fifty years, the Guardian of the Well just looked at him - not moving, not saying a word. Every time the water bubbled, she scared him away. He then fell asleep and the water of the well was gone when he woke up. At the end of the play, when the magical water is bubbling again and the old man is sleeping, the young hero approaches the well, but the Guardian of the Well makes a seductive dance, leading him to supernatural beings with whom he needs to fight.

Although Yeats hadn't attended any presentation of Noh by the time he was writing *At the Hawk's Well*, it reveals many similarities with that form of theatrical realization, mainly to a play named *Yoro*, specially due to the presence of elements like the fountain of youth, the leaves, the old and the young man. Making use of Japanese resources, Yeats discusses universal themes, such as the fall of the leaves metaphorically representing time, which is the destroyer of everything. Another universal theme, which also appears in other plays with Cuchulain, is the quest to achieve immortality facing great dangers; in other words, "being a hero" as Galahad, Lancelot, King Arthur, Hercules. A different way to achieve immortality that would move Yeats and was highly valued by William Shakespeare and so many other great writers who came after him, is the "immortality through art".

The musicality of the play, and its references to noh

In *At the Hawk's Well*, Yeats is looking for a new way to write drama. He attributes to music a very important role, using it from an artistic perspective of rapprochement and dialogue with Noh, where music is a mainstay of the staging construction. Although the Irish author did not intend to create a Japanese presentation, when we examine it, in parallel, the music in his play and in the traditional Eastern practice, we find a number of reference points which, when connected, draw very well his perspective.

One of these reference points is the Irish author's option for adopting a small group of performers on stage: "Three Musicians, the Guardian of the Well; an old man and a young man" (Yeats 136), quite similar to the traditional Noh spectacle, that always involves a small choir, musicians, and at least one *Shite* and one *Waki*, which belong to four main categories¹ of this practice, namely: *Shite* (仕手, シテ), the protagonist; *Waki* (脇, ワキ), the counterpoint of shite; *Kyogen* (狂言), the artists who perform the

Aikyōgen (間狂言), which are interludes of Noh plays. They also perform between two plays of the same program; *Hayashi* (囃子) ou *Hayashi-kata* (囃子方) are the musicians.

Another reference to Noh in *At the Hawk's Well* is the musical ensemble: three voices, a drum, a gong and a Zither. This group has a timbre identity that, despite the presence of the Zither, can be easily connected to the striking sound of the traditional Noh's musical ensemble, called *Hayashi*, which, in addition to the sound of voices, uses the transverse flute (笛 *fue*)², the lap drum (大鼓 *ōtsuzumi*) or *Okawa* (大皮), the shoulder drum (小鼓 *kotsuzum*), and a barrel-shaped drum (太鼓 *taiko*).

The positioning of the musical ensemble established by the author in *At the Hawk's Well* is similar to the *Hayashi's* in Noh, as they sit along the back of the stage, facing the audience and fully visible. *Hayashi's* members are exclusively musicians, and their positioning follows standards, according to the nature of each instrument: the musician leftmost (from the point of view of the audience) plays with two sticks the *Taiko* drum set on a shelf; on his right, there are the *Ōtsuzumi* drum and the *Kotsuzumi* drum; and finally, the instrument at the right end is the *Nōkan flute*. The instructions Yeats gives in the stage directions make this connection clear:

The stage is any bare space before a wall against which stands a patterned screen. A drum and a gong and a zither have been laid close to screen before the play begins. If necessary, they can be carried in, after the audience is seated, by the First Musician, who also can attend to the lights if there is any special lighting. (Yeats 136)

Another reference to the Japanese culture is the musicians characterization. When describing it, Yeats says «their faces are made-up to resemble masks», pointing directly to this key element. Although in the practice of Noh musicians do not wear any masks, the members of *Jiutai* traditionally do. They wear a formal black kimono, the *Montsuki*, adorned with five crests to indicate the school to which they belong, accompanied by a *Hakama* (piece of clothing similar to a skirt) or a *Kami-shimo*, a combination of *Hakama* and a jacket with exaggerated shoulders.

The way music should be played in the Irish play also reveals a reference point to Noh, as shown in Richard Taylor's text:

The intervention of the Musicians at the moment of the Guardian's possession by the goddess is also a remarkable instance of assimilation. As in Noh, the dynamic addition of massed voices is enormously effective in raising the level of tension, and Yeats also uses the device to narrate the dance and offer commentary which would not be appropriate to any of the characters. In addition, Yeats has given his Musicians a far more dramatic role, associating them closely with the supernatural order from the very beginning. *At the Hawk's Well* opens with richly textured lyric verse delivered by the seemingly omniscient and mysterious chorus, who set the scene and accomplish the introduction of the audience into the imaginary reality of the action, and their song is further emphasized by

the ritual unfolding and folding of a cloth. Instead of a gradual withdrawal from actuality, as in Noh, we are introduced immediately to another level of reality, which is underlined by the counterpoint of their freer and ornamented lyricism with the more austere and objective formality of the long parameters used by the characters themselves. The sudden intervention of the chorus as the Guardian of the Well dances is particularly effective as it reintroduces their more freely musical and heightened speech with all its connotations of supernatural world, and closely follows the practice of Noh where the chorus functions mainly as an extension of characterization or as an external commentator, substituting for the single actor at the climax of his emotional experience. (Taylor 153)

The transposition of noh elements into the play

During the process of composing the original music for At the Hawk's Well, we tried to stay closer to the perspective we believe Yeats had when writing the text for the play. To do so, we followed, as far as possible, his creative procedures. That led us to use as references nothing but theoretical material, such as academic texts, pictures and drawings, interviews and stage directions.

A number of preliminary studies have shown that the author had never intended to imitate the eastern theatre, which is the exact line of thinking we adopted. In our understanding, when he attached the writing process of the play to a theoretical research based on Ezra Pound's translations of Ernest Fenollosa's text, in fact, he operated what we identify as the *Transposition*³ of Noh elements into his work.

It is important to explain that the *Transposition* process keeps a strong relationship with its musical source, although being assigned to a procedure in theatre practice. *Transposition* could be explained, in a more general way, as the set of adjustments one must implement to bring an specific idea into a different context from where it originally belongs. When creating a novel, it could mean to bring into text the idea of «passage of time» using words, sentences, written metaphors. In musical practice, it could mean to manage acoustic events over musical scales, rhythmic patterns, etc. However, when applied to theatre practice, *Transposition* acquires a broader spectrum, not just in terms of who will be the operator of adjustments, but also which elements will be adjusted; thus it can include theater non-acoustic elements, such as, the scenery, lightning, symbolic gestures, plot development, inter-characters relationship, etc.

Regarding this broader *Transposition* procedure adopted in the writing of the music for *At The Hawk's Well*, it has to be taken into consideration that W. B. Yeats himself became one reference of ours, and figures as an element to be managed in the creative process, enriching the research, especially in the points where his drama differs from Noh plays.

The opening of *At the Hawk's Well* presents many characteristics of the Yeatsian powerful writing:

I call to the eye of the mind
A well long choked up and dry
And boughs long stripped by the wind,
And I call to the mind's eye
Pallor of an ivory face,
Its lofty dissolute air,
A man climbing up to a place
The salt sea wind has swept bare

Combined with the set of given instructions for its enactment, not only do they create reference points, but also, a solid contact area between the author's work and the Noh's theatre practice since the very beginning of the play, establishing a duality that will continue until the end of the presentation:

Noh structure is an exact counterpart of the musical composition. The formal announcement of the subject, situation, or circumstance by the deuteragonist is followed by a statement of his name, social condition, and present intention. The travel-song which ends the introductory section normally describes the journey he is undertaking and introduces much seasonal imagery with its heavy burden of emotional overtones in Japanese culture. (Taylor 141)

This observation clarifies that the appearance of contact areas are, in fact, results of transpositions operated by Yeats. In the specific case of the opening, the contact areas are not limited to the introductory features shared by both Yeats's play and Noh, but also in the common format of their presentation, alternating the singing and speech. Hence, Noh's sung parts, the *Uthai*, who mingled with spoken parts, the *Kataru*, are elements that ended up taking part in our musical composition through Yeats's notes in the text. The same happened to concepts like "Ma" (notably its configuration of the silent moments, widely applied by us), and the *Jo-ha-kyū*.

Another element of interest to the musical creative process was the "personal look", mainly because from the very beginning we understood that it wouldn't be just about working on Noh references received through Yeats (who had received them from Ezra Pound), but also, to combine them with the results of a large research directly into the Japanese source, which should be held in parallel to the studies of the Yeatsian universe. We came into the conclusion that the reflections emerged during this process would forge the best choice of options for writing and recording the original music for *At the Hawk's Well* opening.

In the end of the process, the characteristic voice emission of Noh presented in our musical composition is not isolated, but placed side-by-side with the western way, the so-called *Bel Canto*, or *Classical singing*. It happened mostly because, according to our view, this sort of miscegenation caused by variations in the voices emissions

(speech, half-singing, singing) is a strong feature of the play. Moreover, it is responsible for revealing Yeats's personal look on the Noh elements and practice (*Uthai, Kataru*). Consequently, we chose to adopt the same focus on the voice element and its later artistic processing in our own process of musical composition, for the sake of providing "our personal look" specially originated from "Yeats' personal look on Noh».

The musical writing process

This choice gave initial direction to the musical writing, not making it any easier though. We found a number of new and fascinating information:

Each lyrical unit has a more or less fixed literary form, subjectmatter, and rhetorical ornamentation, and associated with each is a general voice style, ranging from pure speech, a figured or heightened recitation, through melodic patterns based on varied rhythms, which are usually chanted by the main and secondary characters, tho those of fixed and emphatic rhythm which are generally employed by the chorus. The pitch range of the different styles may vary from "high" to "very low", depending on the effect desired and also shift from the "weak" tonal scale (which employs the full octave range of four main tones and numerous semi-tones) to the "string" tonal scale (which depends for effect on accent, dynamic stress, tone color, and a special and a special technique of accomplishing upward movement by intense straining of the vocal chords rather than melodic inflection). In the "Strong" system pitch intervals are inexact and unstable, and only two man tones are distinguished. Lyrical and emotional passages are normally sung in the "weak" style, while descriptive and powerful sections are intoned in the "Strong" mode. (Taylor 139)

By that time, we were already convinced that combining those two different voice emission possibilities could lead to very interesting results from both the theoretical and expressive point of view. Since the voice in Noh is strongly linked to specific scales and musical systems, we chose to start by creating all melodic structures applying the traditional *Yo* scale, which does not contains halftones intervals:



In practical terms, combining the *Yo* scale with two distinct ways of vocal emission generated a sound that ranges from "alternation" to "simultaneity" of very different aesthetics, the western and the eastern, resulting in a particular new approach.

Intending to follow Yeats's instructions for the musician's movements during the play, the musical composition was built on a unit comprising "musical timing" and "scenic timing", considering them as one indivisible action, allowing the performers to fulfill both musical and scenic tasks.

The group of instruments originally addressed for the play had also been adapted to our needs and possibilities. The shoulder drum *Kotsuzum* (小鼓) and the stick drum Taiko (太鼓) were replaced by a high pitch bongo, and a small plastic pot; the Zither was replaced by a twelve-string guitar; The Yamatogoto (大和琴), a historical instrument that originally has six to seven strings, and is believed to have been created in Japan, was replaced by a prepared steel strings guitar. Its preparation consisted by the placement of small wooden pieces on the instrument's neck (similar to the Japanese Koto), and an alternative fixed opened tuning in the Yo scale, which also required the replacement of some original strings.



The musical composition's first movement, *andante*, begins with a *A Cappella* session that allows the three musicians to follow Yeats's instructions for staging the opening of the play, while overlapping Noh and classical singing: they walk into the theatre room, unfold the cloth, and walk to the instruments set in the back of the stage. In the following session, the three of them are singing in classical way, and the drums and guitar are included.

The second movement, *adagio*, begins with two calls, one in classical singing, and another in Noh singing. They are followed by a session where a soundscape is set by a delicate melody in an oriental mood executed by a flute, that works as a scenery for the Guardian of the Well to reveal herself, and for the line of the first musician. An important feature of this movement is that its duration is entirely based on the action developed on stage, not in musical bars or seconds.

The third movement, *andante*, has a new calling, followed by a medieval-like song designed to create the mood for the introduction of the old man. After the singing of the verses, the song remains with two musicians performing its melody in *bocca chiusa*, while the first musician keeps speaking.

The fourth and final movement of the musical composition, *andante*, takes up the first idea of overlapping classical and Noh singing, reinforced now by a dense mass of sound produced by the guitar and the drums.

Notes

- 1 There are also other categories of artists in the Noh play:
Shitetsure (仕手連れ, シテレツ). The *shite*'s mate. Sometimes, *Shitetsure* is abbreviated to *Tsure* (連れ, ツレ), although this term refers to both the *Shitetsure* and the *Wakitsure*.
Koken (後見) The hands of the stage, usually one to three people.
Jiutai (地謡) The choir, usually six to eight people.
Waki (脇, ワキ) performs the function that is the counterpart of *shite*.
Wakitsure (脇連れ, ワキツレ) or *Waki-tsure* is the *Waki*'s mate.
- 2 The flute used in Noh is particularly named *Fue* or *Nohkan* (能管).
- 3 This procedure can be found in works like the one held for over thirty-eight-years by musician Jean-Jacques Lemêtre in the French company Théâtre Du Soleil. Although the procedure itself has been part of theatre practice worldwide for long time, it was first identified, studied and named by us in the book entitled *A Macro-Harmonia da Música do Teatro [The Macro-Harmony of Theatre Music]*. São Paulo: Giostri, 2015.

Works Cited

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