

Celebrating Music Chagall's Ceiling of the Opera Garnier

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Resumen. En la inauguración, de 1964, de la temporada de la *Opera Garnier*, de París, Chagall declaró: "Yo quería representar, como en un espejo, un puñado de sueños, las creaciones de los actores y de los músicos, para tener en cuenta la ropa colorida de la audiencia agitándose en el patio de butacas. Para cantar como un pájaro, libre de cualquier teoría o método. Para rendir homenaje a los grandes compositores de óperas y ballets".

El objetivo de este trabajo es acercarnos a la pintura fantástica de Chagall, para entrar en el reino imaginario de la música y de los músicos, rodeado por la multitud de figuras sin peso en un anillo de danza como flotando en el espacio. La cúpula, dividida en cinco grandes campos de color, rinde homenaje a los grandes compositores de la escena musical, desde Orfeo a Stravinsky. El espectáculo visionario animado por figuras simbólicas, personajes de ópera y ballet, los pájaros y las estrellas en colores brillantes y movimiento vivo. La fantasía, la ingenuidad y la improvisación seducen los ojos; poseen la profundidad y el poder de la emoción casi igual a la intensidad de la música que evocan.

Más allá del nivel visible de la pintura al fresco, la extensa obra de Chagall entra en el espacio fantástico de las leyendas y de los sueños, transformando la cúpula de la Ópera en una esfera de música celestial.

Palabras clave. Iconografía Musical, Chagall, Techo de la Opera Garnier.

Abstrac. At the opening of the 1964 celebration of the Opera Garnier, Paris, Chagall declared: "I wanted to represent, as in a mirror, a bunch of dreams, the creations of the actors and musicians; to keep in mind the colourful clothes of the audience stirring on the lower level. To sing like a bird, free of any theory and method. To render homage to the great composers of operas and ballets"¹.

¹ LASSAGNE, Jacques : *Le plafond de l'Opéra de Paris par Marc Chagall*, A. Sauret, Monte Carlo, 1965, p. 89.

The aim of this paper is to have a closer look of Chagall's fantastic painting, to enter in the imaginary realm of music and musicians, surrounded by the crowd of weightless figures in a dancing ring as floating in space. The dome, divided in five great fields of color, pays tribute to the great composers of the musical stage, from Orpheus to Stravinsky. The visionary spectacle is animated by symbolic figures, opera and ballet characters, birds and stars in brilliant colors and vivid movement. Fantasy, naïvety, improvisation seduce the eye; they possess the depth and the power of emotion almost equal to the intensity of music they evoke.

Beyond the visible level of the fresco, the vast Chagall's composition enters in the fantastic space of legends and dreams, transforming the Opera dome in a sphere of celestial music.

Keywords. Music Iconography, Chagall, Ceiling Opera Garnier.

On September 23rd, 1964, at the official unveiling of the new painted ceiling of the Opera Garnier in Paris, Chagall (1887-1985) offered his mural to France in gratitude for the long creative years in his adopted country: " I wanted to represent, as in a mirror, a bunch of dreams, the creations of the actors and musicians; to keep in mind the colourful clothes of the audience stirring on the lower level. To sing like a bird, free of any theory and method. To render homage to the great composers of operas and ballets"².

Among the monumental murals for theatres and theatre halls, the Paris Opera ceiling is probably the most impressive realization in Chagall's career.

1921, Moscow Jewish Art Theatre;
1949, the foyer of the Winter Gate Theatre in London;
1959, the foyer of Frankfort Theatre;
1966, the Foyer of the Lincoln Art Center- Metropolitan Opera House -
in New York.

²English translation : D. Smoje, from LASSAGNE, Jacques : *Le plafond de l'Opéra de Paris par Marc Chagall*, A. Sauret, Monte Carlo, 1965, p. 89: "J'ai voulu, en haut, tel dans un miroir, refléter en un bouquet les rêves, les créations des acteurs, des musiciens ; me souvenir qu'en bas s'agitent les couleurs des habits des spectateurs. Chanter comme un oiseau, sans théorie ni méthode. Rendre hommage aux grands compositeurs, d'opéras et de ballets".

The Paris and New York frescoes are in particular dedicated to music; they are works of baroque spirit and fantasy, the ultimate achievement in Chagall's long association with the world of theatre³.

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Chagall's ceiling decorates the 19th Century monument, the Opera Garnier in Paris. The vast mural was commissioned in 1962, by French Minister of Culture, André Malraux. In its apparent simplicity, it is evocative of the magical world of music, homage to the great masters of the musical scene, from Orpheus to Stravinsky. The musicians are in the company of floating angels, swans, birds and stars, mythical lovers and operatic characters, wavering in space. Brilliant colors and impression of movement are reminiscent of the dome paintings of the Italian churches, going as far back as Ravenna's Neon (or Orthodox) Baptistery at the end of the 4th century⁴, and two famous 16th century sanctuaries : *Santa Maria dei Miracoli* in Saronno⁵ and *Santa Maria del Fiore*, Florence Cathedral⁶, conceived as a mirror of the world.

However, the outlines of Chagall's composition are not defined by geometry; figures, stars, angels, roosters, birds hover around the dome, defying gravity, dreamlike.

The numerous sketches left behind reveal the artist's pictorial strategy, the way he conceived the spherical composition and adapted it to the huge canopy. This particular architecture imposed a challenge, in technical as well as in imaginative point of view. All in all, this monumental painting covers 220 square meters⁷, oil on canvas glued on polyester. It is based on the circle and the cross; although ignoring the symmetry, the visual impression is one of unity and equilibrium.

On first sight, there is evidence of two circular forms; the smaller, central ring, is a background for a superb chandelier, whose lights allow only partial visibility of the painting. This is surrounded by a large belt, suggesting a dancing stage, filled with imaginary figures and symbols of music.

³ For technical reasons, this paper does not include color reproductions. Instead, the reader will find the references for the websites reproducing high quality color illustrations. All sites were last consulted on May 20th, 2009.

The panoramic photograph of the Chagall's Ceiling :

http://image02.webshots.com/2/9/69/57/2006969570092988113tGLXzy_fs.jpg

⁴ Ravenna, ceiling mosaic :

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Neon_Bapistry_Ceiling_Mosaic

⁵ Saronno, *Assumption of the Virgin, Angel Concert*, by Gaudenzio Ferrari (1534) :

<http://www.gbgrassi.it/didattica/alef/saronno/images/coroang.jpg>

⁶ Vasari-Zuccari, *The Last Judgement* (1568-1579) :

<http://travel.webshots.com/photo/2084743700012508492qSebbT>

⁷ Equivalent of 2,153 square feet.

Using his own pictorial language, inspired by the architectural space and ancient models, Chagall represented his own vision of a musical canopy of heaven.

The next step was the choice of five great fields of color following pentagonal design of space, spread around in the shape of petals; each one as a stage for its own spectacle. Chagall composed the succession of dominant colors: red, yellow, blue, green and white with a touch of yellow as a contrast between the warm and cool fields. Their interface is harmonized by complementary colors and their shades. From each part radiates a particular light and different emotion, preparing the stage for the “actors” of the monumental show.

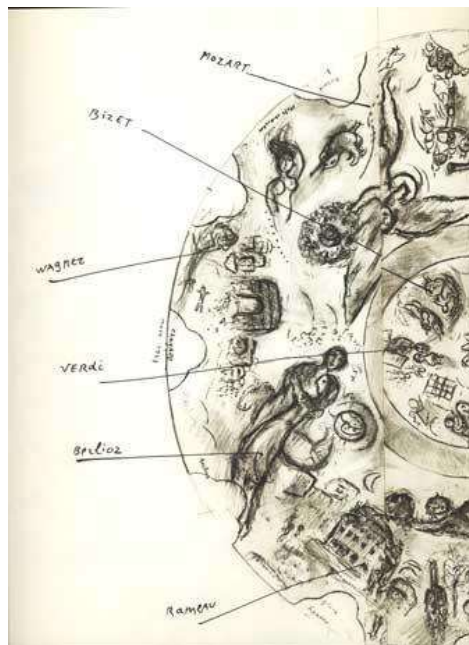
The spatial structure of the ceiling is accentuated by four axes in the outer circle: the Tour Eiffel, and in the same diagonal line, the blue angel; on the other side, Berlioz' lovers and the red angel. They are all pointing to the central ring, suspended in an imaginary space, creating a movement of unity of the whole composition.

On this floating stage, there are Paris' monuments, reference to the real world: the most evident, the Tour Eiffel and the Opera Garnier (façade and profile)⁸. Beside Place de la Concorde, there is the Arc de Triomphe and typical Parisian rows of houses on the riverside, as homage to the City of Light.

There is no logic of time or space in the choice of themes, figures and symbols: ancient and modern, real and imaginary figures are dancing together on the Olympic heights of the dome. Great personages of music and the lovers lighter than angels, the legendary birds and violin playing alone, crowned roosters, strange animals, fauns and satyrs inhabit the same space illuminated by the colors of the rainbow. It's Chagall's proper imagery, an echo of his long experience with the world of theatre.

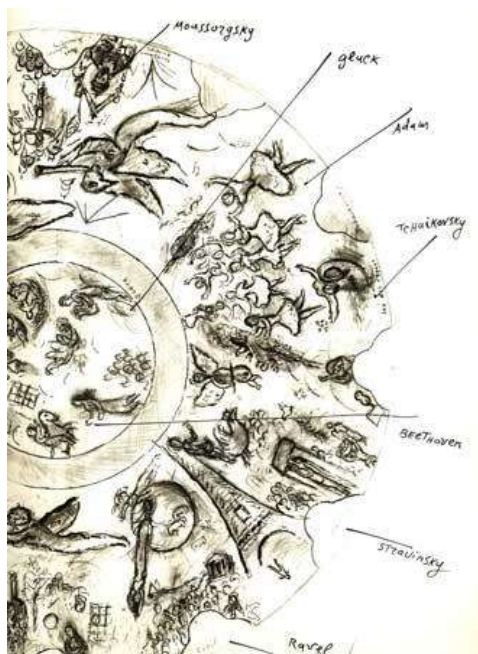
Let us start with a short survey of successive scenes, in order to give an idea of Chagall's pictorial “intrigue”, mixing celestial and earthly levels in an open sky. Each of five color fields is dedicated to composers and their masterworks; their association has nothing to do with chronology or stylistic features.

⁸ Opera Garnier : <http://www.artloft.com/wpimages/chagall/garnier.jpg>



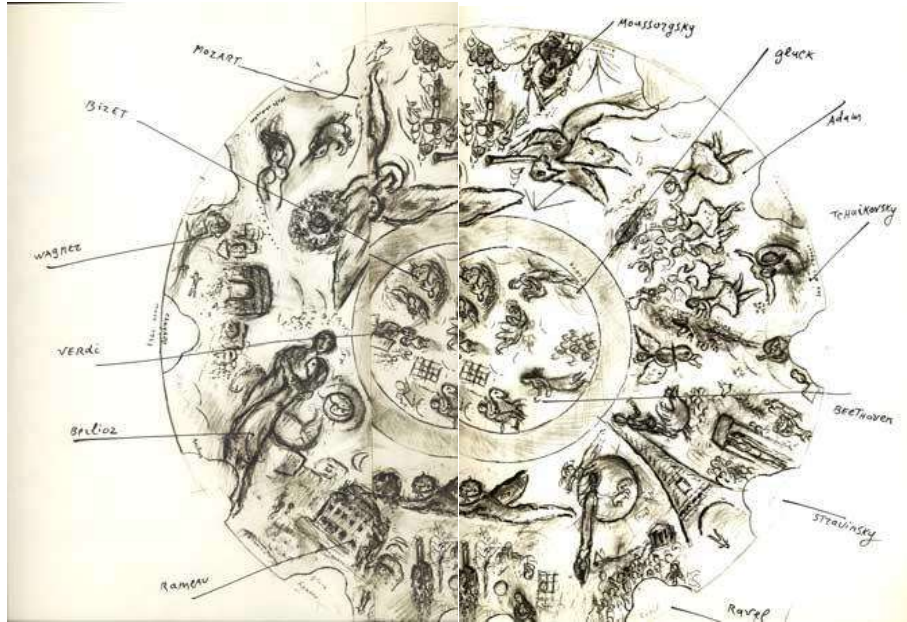
Sketch n. 1

On the sketch n. 1, in the central ring, there are figures of Bizet and Verdi; in the outer circle, profiles of Mozart, Wagner, Berlioz and Rameau.



Sketch n. 2

Sketch n. 2, the central ring: Gluck and Beethoven; in the outer circle: Mussorgsky, Adam, Stravinsky, Ravel and Debussy (invisible on this illustration)⁹.



Sketch n. 3

The central ring represents the theme for the outer circle variations; the same color fields in contrasting position, whose residents are prominent operatic figures: Carmen (Bizet, red), Orfeo (Gluck, green), Fidelio (Beethoven, blue) and Verdi (yellow).

As a leitmotiv, golden angel with bunch of flowers, allegory of French musicians, hovering across the ring. He will appear again in the large belt, above French music space, flying over Pelléas and Mélisande.

The outer ring is composed like a flower of five petals, five areas of different colors, corresponding to particular subjects.

⁹ Illustration with the names of composers engraved on the panoramic reproduction of the dome:

<http://www.pb.nogentsurmarne94.iae.pconline.fr/images/CE1a%20paris%202008/chagall%20plafond%20opera.jpg>

The Red area celebrates ballet and Russian folklore, illustrating the most popular works by Ravel and Stravinsky. The intensive color of passion submerges la Tour Eiffel. On the left side, Ravel's ballet *Daphnis and Chloe*: the mythic lovers united in one body, floating in space, above the crowd of bacchanal. Young girls captured by fauns and satyrs, illustrate the passionate music of Ravel¹⁰. At la Tour Eiffel's foot is Greek temple, reminiscent of the homeland of the lovers. The prevailing red color gives a dramatic touch to the landscape, seashore, sailing boats, sheep, double figures of angels in the air.

On the right side, at the Tour Eiffel's summit, Chagall appears palette in hand, contemplating the scene below, an imaginary spectacle where dreams become reality.



Represented in the first row is Stravinsky's ballet *The Firebird*, the marriage scene in red and gold lights, musicians on the street, guests bringing offerings to the young couple. As a part of the legend, a figure of Chagall's personal mythology: a crowned rooster looks down over a church dome and a Russian village. In the high area, as in a fairy tale, the magic violin is playing on its own.

The Yellow area is devoted to classical ballet, depicting choreography free of any stage set. Representing Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* and Adam's *Giselle*, he painted dancers suspended in space, moving in light pirouettes, while the prima ballerina, carrying flowers, suggests a swan's gracious movement on the water¹¹.

¹⁰ Chagall followed the poem of Longus, which inspired the ballet. SORLIER, Charles: The "Daphnis and Chloe of Chagall", in *Homage to Chagall*, 1982, pp. 131-136.

¹¹ <http://www.flickr.com/photos/fotoric/1000713088/in/set-72157594541067356/>

The Blue area associates the two M's: Mussorgsky and Mozart, far away in time and space, but close to the painter's musical preferences. Chagall chose *Boris Godunov* and *The Magic Flute*. The strong opposition of characters is indicated by the two great angels, floating above the church towers: Boris' angel, red-winged and double-faced playing the last judgement trumpet (more like the Renaissance cornet)¹²,



in contrast with Mozart's angel, a nude figure with smooth contour lines in suspended flight, protecting Mozart, shown in a flower medallion¹³.



¹² Red angel : http://culturofil.net/images/pascaline/plafond_garnier/detail_plafond.jpg

¹³ <http://melindaschwakhofer.files.wordpress.com/2008/02/garnierdetail.jpg>

Chagall had a preference for Mozart and especially for *The Magic flute*, which he considered as the greatest of all operas, “so spiritual, so religious.”

The link between the two operas is created by two birds: the smaller one, with dark wings, escaping from a crowd of revolting peasants, heading to the blue space of the Magic flute; the bigger bird, playing a flute, enters in the illuminated realm, making a transition to the **Green area**.

This is the field devoted to French romanticism with a touch of drama. Above the famous Paris monuments, two pairs of lovers are united on both sides of the Arc de Triomphe: on the borderline of the dome, Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde in embrace, immersed in the green waters of the river; Berlioz’ Romeo and Juliette flying away on an inverted horse.

Homage to Paris and French music occupies the luminous **Off-white field**, which is animated by the radiant red of the Opera Garnier. In the foreground is a group of three dancers, and then, flying on top of the monument, the golden angel¹⁴ with a bunch of flowers, the symbol of generations of French musicians. And there is one name written: Rameau.



The French tradition goes on; there is a large space offered to Debussy and Pelléas and Mélisande. The scene is separated by blue trees and illuminated by the intense yellow of an angel bathing in the sun. Just under the angel is Mélisande’s figure, seated on the border of the dome. In the middle distance from her, Golaud, lord of the castle, is throwing an insistent look at Pelléas, whose face appears through the isolated window screen¹⁵.

¹⁴ <http://www.artloft.com/wpimages/chagall/garnier.jpg>

¹⁵ Jacques Lassagne suggested that Chagall gave Pelléas André Malraux face. In LASSAGNE, Jacques : *Le plafond de l’Opéra de Paris par Marc Chagall*, A. Sauret, Monte Carlo, 1965, p. 71.

The whole impression is powerful. In this visual spectacle, Chagall created a monumental homage to music in a fairy-tale vision. Its poetry resides in the link he established between the show on the stage and the theatre dome, including the colorful "audience stirring on the lower level".

* * *

For further consideration, it would be worthwhile to throw more light on some thematic issues, in order to explore Chagall's pictorial vocabulary associated with music:

- * Chagall's bestiary, hybrid beings playing music, considered in comparison with earlier works, as well as variations in morphology and its symbolic meaning;
- * Figures of angels and wandering souls;
- * And most fascinating, the profile of mythic lovers in music and their various theatrical representations.

* * *

Beyond the iconographic scope, it would be interesting to mention the poetry inspired by Chagall's painting. In his earlier years in Paris, Chagall established close links with poets and musicians of his time. They shared common sensibility and ideas through reciprocal admiration and understanding.

Raïssa Maritain (1883-1960) was his close friend; they shared Russian origins, Jewish heritage, and the destiny of the exile. In the book Raïssa dedicated to Chagall, *The Enchanted Storm*¹⁶, she wrote:

Chagall has come with great strides
From morose Russia,
Bearing violins and roses
In his bags.¹⁷

¹⁶ MARITAIN, Raïssa : *Marc Chagall ou l'Orage enchanté*, Éd. des Trois Collines, Genève, 1948, pp. 306-307.

¹⁷ALEXANDER, Sidney: *Marc Chagall, A Biography*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1978, p. 307.

« Chagall est venu à grand pas
De la Russie morose
Il a dans sa besace
Des violons et des roses »

Dujka Smoje

In this book, written in 1942, she described Chagall's paintings with a deep insight. As in a visionary premonition, her poem evokes the animated canopy of his future opera ceiling, full of musicians and archangels, all the great personages, spangled cocks and cows. In her poetry, Raïssa Maritain captured the artist's life force, his tender, deep joy with a touch of melancholy:

He has painted all the world
And nothing is left out
All the colors of the sun
Are dancing there.¹⁸

Later on, the French poet Louis Aragon (1897-1982) composed twenty-five poems dedicated to the artist "who tells stories without any word"¹⁹. Among them, inspired by the Paris' monumental painting, *Madrigal for a ceiling*, celebrating Opera Garnier:

As dance music As a dream
Lighten the lead of the dawn in us [...]
The Opera house fills with the pure song of cicadas
Towards this azure sky open to Debussy²⁰

And the last stanza²¹ :

Marc Chagall there is this canopy
Over the orchestra and the deep quiet
Listening in the night
A new lesson is written on the ceiling.

¹⁸ English translation: MERTON, Thomas: *In the Dark before Dawn*, New Directions Publishing, New York, 2004, pp. 231-232.

French original :

« Il a peint l'univers entier.

Rien n'y manque.

Avec toutes les couleurs du soleil qui y dansent... »

¹⁹ "Celui qui dit des choses sans rien dire" Chagal XV, in *Les Adieux et autres poèmes*, 1982, pp. 148, 169.

²⁰ English translation : D. Smoje. French édition : *Les Adieux et autres poèmes*, 1982, p. 167-8 :

«Ainsi la danse la musique Ainsi le rêve

Contrebalance en nous le plomb d'aube du jour...

Et l'Opéra s'emplit du chant pur des cigales

Vers cet azur d'abord ouvert à Debussy... »

²¹ *Les Adieux et autres poèmes*, p. 168 :

«Marc Chagall il y a désormais cette voûte

Au-dessus de l'orchestre et du taire profond

Et fantastiquement dans la nuit à l'écoute

Une morale neuve est écrite au plafond »

In Chagall's own words: "While I paint, I ask myself these questions: For whom am I painting? Where do I come from? And where am I going? As always, I would like to approach myself not only with the eyes but with the very heart of others. [...] We want happiness in the clear pure colors of the earth's tumult, so that art will reenter a paradise as in the overture to Mozart's *Magic Flute*.

I wished to surround myself with color and music, with these characters whose faces retain a smile. [...] I tried to express all that as best as I could on these walls. On them are those heroic figures from music, the singers and dancers who wanted and want to act the contents of their lives for us all"²².

Two years after the Opera Garnier ceiling, Chagall followed the same idea, decorating the lobby of the Lincoln Center, the new building of the Metropolitan Opera House in New York (1966). It is another masterpiece, titled *The Triumph of Music* and *The Sources of Music*, radiating the same spirit, the monumental mural inhabited by mythic and historical figures defying gravity. Beyond the visible level of the fresco, the vast Chagall's compositions enter in the fantastic space of legends and dreams, transforming the Opera walls in a sphere of celestial music. Both Opera houses offer to the audience an enchanting visual spectacle celebrating music.

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²² SORLIER, Charles, ed. *Chagall by Chagall*, H. N. Abrams, New York, 1979, p. 170.