

The Eloquence of the Body

Singing, Acting and Moving on the Early Modern Operatic Stage

“Something said by one who knows how to recite well and accompanied by gesture will make a much greater impression in the souls of the listeners and will move more easily in them the affects of anger, hate, passion, joy and alike than it would if it is simply narrated by someone without gesture nor change of voice.”ⁱ

Music has been disembodied. The purpose of this project is to re-embodiment it by reconstructing the history of gesture as a vehicle for passions on the Italian operatic stage. If our knowledge of early music practices has made tremendous progress since the 1950s, staging and acting in early Italian opera remain for the most part *terra incognita*.ⁱⁱ Music is a complex, transient, and evasive object, contrary to other art forms where the medium merges with the work. Once it has been played it disappears, surviving only in the analogic and largely incomplete representation of the score. Music is a practice; its actualization through performance therefore plays a determining role. Producing or reproducing a sound object involves several mediations: score, interpretation, and eventually performance. All of them condition the act of performing. Performance is a fabrication, a modern rewriting and interpretation of a lost musical object, which has come down to us in partial and incomplete traces.ⁱⁱⁱ In the case of opera, not only has the sound object vanished but indeed the whole visual spectacle – staging and acting – has disappeared as well.

Bodily gestures were instrumental in expressing the passions. The body of the singer represents one of the most efficient dramatic resources on the operatic stage. It is not only a sound-producing instrument but also an eloquent instrument, which moves, gesticulates, and produces facial expressions in order to convey the passions expressed by the text and the

music. Imitating and moving the passions was the major concern of various art forms during the seventeenth century. Opera was invented at the turn of the seventeenth century by Florentine humanists as an attempt to recreate the magical power of Ancient Greek music and drama. Its scientific background was still strongly linked to a pneumatic theory of sound, as we will see. Due to a lack of sources, the phenomena of acting and the role of the body onstage remain largely uninvestigated. Reconstructing a history of movement based on static documents is certainly not an easy task. Only an interdisciplinary approach to a variety of sources can allow us to explore new territories in order to reconstruct a history of movement and the expression of passions onstage and better understand how staging was realized. Natural philosophy, history of medicine, treatises on rhetoric, theater, dance, gymnastics, and etiquette handbooks deal extensively with the body, its motions and the expression of the passions. Public performances of theater, dance, and music also raised strong moral concerns. The condemnation of opera and theater by moralists gives an enlightening insight in how powerful, alluring, and dangerous the expression of passions could be.

ⁱ “Una cosa detta da uno che sappia ben porgerla et accompagnarla con gesto farà molto maggiore impressione nelli animi delli ascoltanti e moverà in essi più facilmente gli affetti d’ira, d’odio, di passione, d’allegrezza e simile che non farà quando da uno senza gesto o mutazione di voce fusse semplicemente narrata.” *Il Corago, o vero, Alcune osservazioni per metter bene in scena le composizioni drammatiche (ca. 1630)*, eds FABBRI, Paolo and POMPILIO, Angelo. Florence: Olschki, 1983, 93.

ⁱⁱ GREEN, Eugène, *La parole baroque: essai*. Paris: Brouwer, 2001: a pioneer work on French declamation in Baroque theater; WENTZ, Jed, “The Relationship between Gesture, Affect and Rhythmic Freedom in the Performance of French Tragic Opera from Lully to Rameau”, PhD, University of Leiden, 2010. Both these texts focus on France, where more sources are available. For Italy, cf. GUALANDRI, Francesca, *Affetti, passioni, vizi e virtù: la retorica del gesto nel 600*. Milan: Peri, 2001 and Bryant, Brooke A., “The Seventeenth-Century Singer’s Body: An Instrument of Action”, PhD, CUNY, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ On the fabrication of historical objects and the absence, see CERTEAU, Michel de, *L’Écriture de l’histoire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975; on historical reconstruction based on traces, see GINZBURG, *Il formaggio e i vermi: Il cosmo di un mugnaio del ’500*. Turin: Einaudi, 1976; id., *Indagini su Piero: Il Battesimo, il ciclo di Arezzo, la Flagellazione*. Turin: Einaudi, 1981; id., *Miti, emblemi, traccie: Morfologia e storia*. Turin: Einaudi, 1986. On HIP (Historically Informed Performance), see BUTT, John, *Playing with History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; GOEHR, Lydia, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992; HAYNES, Bruce, *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer’s History of Music for the Twenty-First century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; TARUSKIN, Richard, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.