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HISTORICAL ACTION

Since its widespread revival over the past forty years, the practitioners of baroque opera have been principally concerned with its vocal and orchestral aspects, and extensive efforts have taken place to reconstruct these in a historically informed manner. What has often been overlooked is that opera's communicative power also depends on the visual and theatrical elements that complement the musical performance. However, the reconstruction of historical acting is not a straightforward proposition. The lack of reliable means to notate or record movement and gesture in the seventeenth century has created a documentary boundary for reconstructors today. While aspects of musical performance practice are accessible through the musical score and other sources, the element of acting belongs to a domain where text alone is unable to provide sufficient clues: only a combination of empirical and textual research can prove fruitful, and this was what sparked the idea for a seminar where researchers and practitioners could discuss such matters and experiment.

The seminar on historical action entitled 'Baroque Gesture: What's the Point?' took place at New College, University of Oxford, on Saturday 18 April 2015 and was organized by me (Dionysios Kyropoulos) and Andrew Lawrence-King. The day opened with Lawrence-King welcoming the participants and setting out the aims of the seminar. Subsequently he led a roundtable discussion about the most important factors that go to make up a good performance and how historical action can be used to improve it.

Following the discussion, I gave a presentation that introduced the field of historical acting and gesture, and examined some of the reasons why these are rarely used today, such as the lack of period stagecraft teaching in the undergraduate curriculums of conservatoires and the all-or-nothing approach of directors and producers who seem eager to experiment with historical acting only if everything else in the production is historical (costumes, lighting, sets and so forth). The roots of baroque gesture were traced back to ancient rhetoric, and the connection between rhetoric and music was explored, as well as the significance of the medical theory of the four humours as a historical means of understanding the workings of the body and soul. The physical-emotional concept of humorism, which is inextricably connected with the theory of the affections and their encapsulation in baroque musical ideals, can offer great insights to modern performers and stage directors, and can become the basis of new rehearsal techniques. The basic rules of historical stagecraft, as deduced from a list of twenty historical treatises, were demonstrated, and pointers and examples drawn from my personal experience as a performer and director were given. The information from primary sources together with lessons learned from other revivals (such as the historical-instrument revival) can help us construct modern working models of period acting techniques. These techniques could be used to create performances which would be historically informed but would at the same time touch a modern audience, without alienating it.

After my presentation, Lawrence-King spoke about the performance of seventeenth-century opera. He introduced the idea of *tactus* (a stable pulse) for the musical side of the performance, offering a plethora of examples and links with historical sources. He also explained that *recitar cantando*, the compositional style used in the first operas, is music that aims to serve the text and was meant to be acted. He then spoke of how courtly *sprezzatura* (the mannerisms and attitudes employed by the courtiers in the *Seicento*) and the skills

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of dance and swordsmanship had a pronounced effect on stage movement and action, and how we could harness their power by studying these disciplines in the context of operatic performance today.

The lunch break was followed by practical workshops where the theoretical ideas introduced in the first half of the seminar were applied. I started by working with the participants on the basics of historical stagecraft, including the standard posture and feet positions, and the way to move and to use the arms and hands. When the basics were assimilated, Lawrence-King introduced specific gestures using examples from operas, explained how characters address each other on stage, and then worked on stage positioning and arrangement. Finally, pointing gestures (deictics) and their power to evoke the imagination were explored in depth. The day ended with an informal discussion and feedback session with the participants.

It is hoped that this seminar will be the first of many to come. Providing a platform for researchers and practitioners to interact, to share their experiences and to experiment is, I believe, one of the best ways to bridge the gap between theoretical and practical investigations and bring us a step closer to unearthing the full potential of historical stagecraft in a modern context.

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A 'HISTORICALLY INFORMED' *PYGMALION*

A 'historically informed' stage performance of Horace Coignet and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 'scène lyrique' *Pygmalion* (1770) is enough to whet the appetites of Rousseau scholars and theatre historians specializing in the eighteenth century. They have been dreaming about it for a long time, yet also dreading it: the score, written by the amateur musician Horace Coignet at Rousseau's request in 1770, is strictly functional and artistically mediocre at best. Rousseau's text (1763) is a long monologue by the sculptor Pygmalion lost in the contemplation of his creation, the statue of Galathée. Finally, the gods accede to his prayers and give life to the statue. The play ends with the animation of Galathée and the few words she pronounces as she realizes the marble she was made of has turned into flesh. The last words are left to Pygmalion, who wishes from then on to 'live only through [her]'.

The conference 'Rousseau and the Theatre: Political-Aesthetic Ideals and Practices' (Stockholm, Royal Coin Cabinet, 24–26 August 2015) could not have chosen a better centrepiece than this 'historically informed performance' of *Pygmalion*. The event was organized by Performing Premodernity, an interdisciplinary research group formed to study the musical and theatrical practices and cultures of both Sweden and the rest of Europe from 1760 to 1815. Based at the Department of Culture and Aesthetics at Stockholms Universitet and led by Meike Wagner, Professor of Theatre Studies there, it is being funded for five years (2012–2017) by The Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences.

The ten invited speakers were scholars in the fields of literature (Felicity Baker, University College London; Michael O'Dea, Université Lyon 2; Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval, Université Paris-Est; David Marshall, University of California Santa Barbara), theatre history (Patrick Primavesi, Universität Leipzig; David Wiles, University of Exeter; Maria Gullstam, Stockholms Universitet and herself the organizer of the conference) and music history (David Charlton, Royal Holloway, University of London; Jørgen Langdalen, Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet, Trondheim; and myself (Jacqueline Waeber, Duke University)). In a larger context, this conference also testified to a welcome shift in Rousseau scholarship that had started by the late 1990s with a series of reappraisals of Rousseau as a man of the theatre, eroding a nearly three-centuries-old tradition that had indefatigably cast him as anti-theatrical on the sole basis of his *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les Spectacles* of 1758 – a piece of writing that has since its publication received as many ill-informed comments and interpretations as his equally polemical *Lettre sur la musique françoise* of 1753.

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