Cambridge Opera Journal, **16,** 3, 311–318 © 2004 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0954586704001922

Defrosting instructions: A response

MARY ANN SMART

The title of this issue, 'Performance Studies *and* Opera', optimistically announces a conjunction between two disciplines that have previously had surprisingly little to do with each other, despite substantial common ground. The three articles gathered here, however, bear marks both of the excitement sparked by the novelty of bringing the methods of performance studies to bear on opera (significantly, the reverse process, operatic theory used to interpret other modes of performance, remains almost unimaginable) and a caution occasioned by their authors' sensitivity to the difficulties involved in any such translation.

On the surface, the disciplinary alliance seems natural. Besides the obvious overlap in their objects of study, opera studies and performance studies could both be considered 'young' fields, and both traffic in discourses aimed to unseat and rejuvenate ossified academic or interpretative traditions. Performance studies is literally young, its precepts and the institutional structures that support it formed a bit more than twenty years ago by a marriage of ritual anthropology and theatre studies. The discipline's framework has from the beginning emphasised the political power of theatrical representation, the envoicing of marginalised groups, and the hegemonic effects of realism and mimesis as 'default' aesthetics. And while writing on opera is almost as old as musicology itself, the field known as 'opera studies' is an upstart, characterised by richly contextual interpretation and by analytical-historical approaches that address the submerged power relations that shape operatic works. Like performance studies, then, opera studies has kept a distance from the persuasions of its parent discipline, resisting especially the source-oriented and formalist aspects of traditional musicology. At the same time, this new writing on opera has been influential in making questions of representation, voice and power central to musicology generally.

Yet musicology's relation to other fields always seems to be marked by a kind of 'discipline envy', and the encounter staged within this special issue is no exception. The occasion for envy lies in the fact that performance studies has achieved what opera studies has not, on two counts. Most alluringly, performance studies has invented a language of interpretation that attends to the fluid and vivid details of an individual performance. This event-centered approach takes seriously the exchange between performer and audience in a specific place and time, regarding with suspicion the idea of the work – the fixed, notated texts that carry the expectation of being executed the same way time after time, following the directives of a controlling author. In addition to providing a language that casts the 'ephemerality' of the theatrical performance in positive rather than nostalgic or lamentational terms, the canonical texts of performance studies have almost unanimously read theatrical and quasi-theatrical events as political, as manifestations of voice and body intervening in discourses about power, knowledge and modes of representation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586704001922 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Such transparency of political content has become a kind of Grail for musicology over the last twenty years; but even readings grounded in the plots and sung text of opera often founder on the slipperiness of the musical signifier, its tendency to suggest simultaneously opposite referents or simply to obliterate meaning, vanquishing the critical capacities with sheer sonorous power.

While opera scholars may long for the relevance and the political focus enjoyed by performance studies, those within performance studies have so far had little to say about opera, as David Levin points out crisply in the final paragraphs of his 'Opera out of performance'. Levin blames this indifference on the tameness of North American operatic productions, which, to compensate for the lack of government funding, tend to be engineered to appeal to 'social' opera-goers and boards of directors, and are thus too cautious to interest hip and politically-motivated scholars and critics. True, the postmodern stagings common (especially) in German opera houses have helped to create a slightly livelier discourse about opera within German-language performance studies.[1] But humdrum productions are only part of the story. Scholars of performance studies have surely felt entitled to overlook opera also because of the genre's famed elitism and because opera endlessly restages a dead and no longer expanding canon.

The very idea of *re*staging is antithetical to the definition of performance studies, since it assumes a stable text that exists to be reinterpreted. The literature of performance studies has focused overwhelmingly on very new theatre, on events that are closer to ritual or protest than to conventional theatre (AIDS marches, New Orleans funeral processions), and – in the few cases where dead authors are admitted into the discourse – on texts that question the limits of traditional theatre.[2] Works like Carolee Schneeman's film of herself kissing her cat, or even the plays of Brecht, disassemble the apparatus of theatrical representation, opening up space for radical critique and emancipatory alternatives to mimesis.[3] As Michelle Duncan notes in her essay in this issue, even the fringe of opera studies that devotes serious attention to performance and to the analysis of revisionist productions has tended to relapse into considerations of an originary, authorial text as a basis or a background against which to meditate on restagings. David Pountney has suggested that intolerance for irony is one of the major obstacles to staging the repertory of French *grand opéra* in a convincing manner today, but his observation might be extended to most standard-repertory opera, which relies for effect on an outpouring of expressive sincerity and risks disintegration if irony – or any kind of detachment

[1] See, for example, the discussion of *Don Giovanni* in Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Show and the Gaze of Theater: A European Perspective* (Iowa City, 1997).

[2] On the protests of the AIDS organisation ACT-UP as theatre, see Elin Diamond, 'The Shudder of Catharsis in Twentieth-Century Performance', in Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds., *Performance and Performativity* (London, 1995), 152–72; on jazz funerals, see Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, 1996).

[3] On Schneemann's *Vesper's Stampede to My Holy Mouth* (1991), see Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London, 1997), 46–9; on Brecht and alternatives to mimesis, see Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London, 1997).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586704001922 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from the means of representation it presupposes – were allowed to make an appearance.[4]

It is perhaps for all these reasons that the formative voices and canonical texts of performance studies are not often mentioned in these pages.[5] Rather than trying to adapt or force-fit the critical discourse of performance studies to the text-obsessed, past-mired world of opera staging and opera scholarship, the three contributors to this issue recognise the need to blaze new paths between the theories of performance studies and opera. Of the three articles, Levin's 'Opera out of performance' offers the bleakest outlook for conversations between the disciplines, if only because his essay was born out of a failed attempt to put real, staged opera in contact with issues – especially the nature of political power – that lie at the heart of performance studies. At the same time, however, Levin's insights into the cultural politics of contemporary opera production suggest one route by which the two disciplinary discourses might make contact. He suggests that American opera houses often mirror the values of the most powerful members of their audiences. Thus productions that reinforce or flatter upper middle-class assumptions are destined to succeed, while those that interrogate humanistic values such as individualism or the just use of power, like Levin's aborted *Macbeth*, are likely to face institutional and economic obstacles. This is a welcome refinement to a discourse of operatic staging that is too often content to entertain only two possibilities: either a production is 'authentic', 'faithful' to the intentions of its composer and poet, in which case it is usually assumed to appeal to the portion of the audience that views opera as entertainment, or else it is 'revisionist', an example of 'director's opera', and is likely to be hated by the majority of American opera-goers, given the benefit of the doubt only by academics and initiates.

Interestingly, Levin himself, in his role as dramaturg, seems to feel compelled to locate the qualities that he and his collaborators wanted to bring out in a production of Verdi's *Macbeth* as residing in the work itself, so that his description of the collective vision for the aborted San Francisco *Macbeth* reads at times like an imaginative musicological interpretation with stunning visual aids. On the most general level, Levin hears the stylistic contrast between the 'melodramatic' or 'exteriorised' style of the original layer of music, composed in 1847, and the denser, more harmonically adventurous passages revised in 1865 as pointing to a deeper abyss within the work – the characters' inability to plumb, or even experience directly, the psychological complexity of the events that grip them. In certain passages, the 'hollowness' that Levin sees as characterising the opera can also be

[4] David Pountney, 'Directing grand opera: *Rienzi* and *Guillaume Tell* at the Vienna State Opera', in *Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge, 2002), 135–6. Cormac Newark comments on this aspect of Pountney's article in his review of the *Companion*, *this journal* 16/2 (2003), 240–1.

[5] Besides the writers and works cited above, one might note the low profile in these pages of influential works by performance theorists Peggy Phelan (*Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* [London, 1993]), Philip Auslander (*Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* [London, 1999]) and Jon Mackenzie (*Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* [London, 2001]), as well as the apparent irrelevance of the ritual anthropology of Victor Turner.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586704001922 Published online by Cambridge University Press

detected in quite specific musical effects, such as the recurrence to extremes of volume and range and the avoidance of a neutral middle register in Macbeth's 'Due vaticini'.

There is only one exception to this desire to receive legitimation from Verdi's (and Piave's) text in Levin's account of the *Macbeth* collaboration, but it is a large one: his advocacy of what is sometimes called 'counterpoint' between music and stage action. In his concluding outline of what fresher stagings might look like, Levin expresses the hope that 'musical discourse might be heard in a dialectical rather than an illustrative relation to events on stage'. It is easy to join in this call for productions that detach themselves purposefully from the meanings and movements of the musical text, but more difficult to believe that such dialectical stagings would make a difference to the way opera is perceived among politically committed intellectuals, or that it would constitute a significant innovation. Probably owing to the influence of film, with its naturalistic aesthetic, opera directors have long been squeamish about stylised effects such as synchronisation between music and movement, or even the broader coordination of scenic events with musical structures. In nineteenth-century Italian operas, with their blatant and repetitive formal patterns, it is routine for 'strong' directors to time distracting stage business for the middle of a slow movement or a cabaletta, and to avoid at all costs gestural events that coincide with the sharp contrasts articulated by the music. This particular brand of 'counterpoint' has become so familiar that a production that dared to flirt with synchronisation at certain weighty moments might actually achieve a Brechtian estrangement, opening up critical distance from the text, more effectively than one that strove for tension between music and staging.

What would happen, Michelle Duncan's article provokes us to ask, if stage directors, set designers, and dramaturgs felt liberated from the guiding force of the authorial text? Duncan's exploration of the unique and disruptive power of the operatic voice begins from a point that, although made almost in passing, is nevertheless fairly earth-shaking in its implications for musicology:

> Interpretations that set a particular operatic *mise-en-scène* in relief against the work 'itself' have become a common strategy for teasing out manifest and latent contents of a work and its performance. But rather than asking what a work and a performance *are*, or how a specific staging illuminates or comments on aspects of a work's meaning, we might examine what a performance *does*; that is, how a performance generates or disrupts levels of meaning by doing. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive, although hermeneutic readings of opera have tended to overlook issues of performativity because they search for an ultimate truth that can be either represented or somehow excavated through a live staging. Being attentive to performativity means looking for ways that performance may expose 'truth' by disruption as well as complementarity.

Duncan's ambitious inquiry is inspired – enabled, even – by the theoretical breakthroughs of Carolyn Abbate, who has recently expressed similar misgivings about the solipsistic nature of hermeneutics and about musicology's disregard for performance.[6] Yet for Duncan not even Abbate escapes the problematic investment

[6] Abbate, 'Music–Drastic or Gnostic?', *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (Spring 2004), 505-536.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586704001922 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in 'vocal disembodiment' that has prevented opera studies from grappling with the question of voice. She reminds us that we have Lacan to blame for this disciplinary blind spot. His psychoanalytic notion of voice as swinging between excess and lack, filtered into musicology via writers such as Kaja Silverman and Michel Poizat, has attracted disproportionate attention to moments when the operatic voice approaches a supra-linguistic cry or scream, as well as to silence and muteness.[7] Abbate's construction of voice as either a 'dead object' or as a violent excessive force can be seen as an elaboration of this tendency to figure voice only in terms of extremes.

With great theoretical virtuosity, Duncan shows that Derrida's cautions against a 'metaphysics of presence' have further discouraged musicologists from embracing or theorising the operatic voice in all its glory. While she acknowledges that audible, embodied speech only *gives the impression of* granting access to immediate meaning and direct subjective expression, Duncan carefully disentangles the dangers of founding a metaphysics on the dream of unmediated speech from a less problematic 'ontology' of presence. Once presence – or 'liveness' – is unburdened from metaphysical claims, the possibility is restored to value live performance as invested with force and with urgent meanings separate from those of the static, notated text or its author, without falling into naiveté. Duncan moves one step further from Derridean notions of presence when she advocates a concept of voice that explodes the traditional ties between live performance and a single, present moment of 'utterance'. Her 'multiplicitous voice that emanates as force' is capable not only of transcending linguistic meaning, but of 'redrawing the boundaries between self and other' and of 'upsetting the logic of [duration and] succession', spreading out from the moment of performance to take in both past and present and unsettling stable subjectivity to model instead 'a state of perpetually becoming'. As fresh as Duncan's readings of Shoshana Felman, Henri Bergson and other philosophers are within musicology's theoretical arena, her celebration of a voice that can move through 'porous bodies', unseat the Kantian subject and transcend language sometimes sounds familiar, not devoid of a certain ingenuous anti-rationalism sketched in the work of Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. But what was easy to dismiss in their commentaries as a utopian voice, divorced from any circumstances of real speech or song, takes on concrete form in Duncan's evocation of Ruth Berghaus's *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

Like Abbate's unforgettable discussion of Laurie Anderson in 'Music—Drastic or Gnostic?', Duncan's closing glance at the Berghaus production gestures towards personal criticism without being *purely* personal. When Abbate recalls Anderson's use of a sound effect that New York audiences instantly heard as the sound of bodies falling from the World Trade Center, she intends the anecdote as a caution against the guesswork that comes into play when we attempt to discover such contextual layers in works of the distant past. But I suspect that, at the same time as it arouses misgivings about the hermeneutic project, Abbate's example will also

[7] Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988); and Poizat, *The Angel's Cry*, trans. Arthur Denner (Ithaca, 1991).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586704001922 Published online by Cambridge University Press

inspire imitation, attempts to build new interpretations based on similar perceptions of immediate, widely graspable resonances between music and surrounding life. Similarly, Duncan's allusive and fragmented memories of Berghaus offer paradigms that could be pursued by other scholars, in relation to other stagings. Her thoughts about the looseness of 'linguistic reference' seem particularly rich, the vivid image of a bald Melisande beautifully concretising that divorce between things as they are described (or prescribed) in Debussy's text and things as they appeared on stage. Perhaps more difficult to appropriate, but equally seductive as a fresh mode of writing about opera, are her comments on the experience of time. The production's deferral (but not complete refusal) of linguistic reference, with the audience shown images and gestures that corresponded to what the singers were doing and saying, but not at the exact moment when music and language evoked those things, worked to expand the moment, enabling a flow through boundaries of self that approximated the flows and ruptures of meaning that are a property of the operatic voice.

If Duncan gives us a view of the operatic voice that is most energetic in its engagement with theory, coming to earth only in a brief glimpse of a long-ago production, Fred Moten parts company altogether with performance studies' traditional grounding in live events. Yet the dialectic between text and act, recording and event, that animates his inquiry lies at the heart of performance studies. Moten approaches *his* operatic voice via an attentive reading of Adorno's theories of writing, filmic montage, and sound recording, which Adorno regarded as itself another form of inscription. As seen by Adorno, all of these 'recording' techniques create distance from the object represented, their various technologies working 'to defer the immediacy, to disrupt the representation, of the object'. And as Moten demonstrates, Adorno positioned musical modernism, and the music of Schoenberg in particular, on the same side of the writing/speech divide: within his theory, dissonance, syncopation and abstraction fulfilled the same function in music as did montage technique in film. Against these 'distanced' and predominantly structural modes of expression, Adorno positions theater, especially its extreme forms of circus and burlesque; theatrical genres are antithetical to writing because 'mimesis importunes on the spectator' – in other words, because one encounters the represented object directly within the liveness of theatrical representation.

Moten reads Adorno with a rigor and concern for detail that slyly, imperceptibly becomes embarrassing for the Frankfurt philosopher, beginning when Moten turns from the writings on phonography and on Schoenberg to reveal surprising similarities of rhetoric in Adorno's attacks on jazz. Thus Moten extends the chain of binaries that began with the well-worn oppositions speaking/writing, event/text and live performance/recording, to superimpose on them the related pairs male/female, white/black, hybrid/pure, and master/subaltern. In this magical, but still somehow respectfully Adornian, gesture, Moten is suddenly able to equate all that resides on the 'live', theatrical side of the divide with blackness and slave status.

In a mood of delighted irony mixed with a good measure of diva-worship, he discovers the perfect nexus of *all* the oppositional dyads in Jessye Norman's encounter with *Erwartung*: the quintessential 'black' voice, located in a notoriously

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586704001922 Published online by Cambridge University Press

large and very material body, giving voice here to music universally recognised as a milestone in the history of modernism. Beyond an enticingly vague analogy between the chromatic saturation of *Erwartung*'s conclusion and the undefinable texture of the black voice in opera, Moten (perhaps wisely) does not try very hard to show where or how the 'blackness' of Norman's sound leaves traces on her recording of *Erwartung*, nor how her rendition differs from those by other singers, or from others by Norman herself. (But this is not necessarily an impossible task or a dead-end; one can imagine a more musicologically oriented exploration of Moten's themes that would have something very interesting to say about specific passages of *Erwartung*.) But even more than the delightful scene he imagines in which Adorno listens to Norman sing *Erwartung*, Moten dazzles with the troubling analogy he draws between the degradation of Schoenberg's hysterical 'Frau' and that of the black subject. It is at this point that 'The phonographic *mise-en-scène*' becomes more than an imaginative chain of connections, more than brilliant commentary on Adorno, and steps onto the disturbing and urgent ground of problems of race and writing about music. In a few searing sentences, Moten figures the denial of subjectivity endemic to most writing about the black voice as equivalent to Schoenberg's hystericisation of his most deranged protagonist:

> What's the difference between the phono-political weight of servant girls singing – the performance of the music of slaves – and the full content of that moment of insanity followed by consoling protest that constitutes the impossible end of *Erwartung*? . . . Someday I'd like to be able to make somebody see and hear the objectional and ontological sociality of the black voice, where being black is only being black in groups, where not only the group of blacks but the group as such is given as an object of a specifically politicised fear and loathing precisely because of the object's collective and disruptive seeing. Adorno's problem is not so much with disenfranchised subjectivity as with the abandonment of a specifically individualised subjection, the sidestepping of the dialectical snare of a freedom that exists only in unfreedom.

Moten teases out these resonances between music and race, modernism and racism, in an evocative language that prefers allusion to argument, poetic imagery to blunt exposition. But while 'The phonographic *mise-en-scène*' adopts a style that is freer and more whimsical than that of most musicological writing on opera, the substance and design of Moten's essay close the opera studies/performance studies circle in one very satisfying way. His focus on a single text (albeit a recording rather than a score) might be liberating for those of us who write about opera from within musicology – demonstrating how we might maintain our traditional focus on texts, but while foregrounding issues of inscription and distance, rather than being naive or unthinking about the relation of that frozen text to the live events of which it is a simulacrum. To pursue the optimistic predictions one step further, it is also easy to imagine that variations on Moten's approach might offer an escape from one of the impasses that has prevented opera scholars from writing more about performance; that is, the tendency of writing about live events to slide into the language of anecdote, of journalistic appreciation, or of fan ethnography.

In the end, maybe 'presence' is what it's all about, for all of us who try to write about opera. As Michelle Duncan reminds us, Derridaean theory has turned

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586704001922 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'presence' into a bad word, a warning of theoretical *Denkfehler* ahead. But what else is at stake in these attempts to render past operatic performances (or those forever unrealised, or frozen on disc) as something more than pleasurable memories or private pleasures, to show them as vital to contemporary concerns of one kind or another? Opera scholars enjoy a sense (well, let's admit it right away, an *illusion*) of presence through their habit of writing in detail about scores, dwelling lovingly on melodic details and effects of motive or harmony or phrasing. And those who approach opera from performance studies tend to find their own guarantor of immediacy in the attention to live event, even if the actual features of the performance are distanced through theoretical or political filters. For both groups, the object of desire remains at a remove – not quite unattainable, but certainly elusive. And while the explorations contained in these pages will never close that gap completely, they offer a wealth of possibilities for re-animating operatic experiences, for 'defrosting' the live events that are too often rendered, once written about, as rigid, frozen, uni-dimensional, eternally fixed.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586704001922 Published online by Cambridge University Press