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Response: Men with a past

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It seems a very long way from a dog howling in pain on François Magendie's laboratory table in 1816 to Gilbert-Louis Duprez's more-or-less novel accomplishment at the Paris Opéra two decades later: the tenor's high C from the chest; the darkened voice; the sound of the future first heard in a performance of *Guillaume Tell*. Most obviously, the sounds of the dog were horrible and horrifying. When Magendie's teacher, the great Xavier Bichat, tried the experiment some years earlier, his cleaning lady asked to move her chambers from near the scene because she could not bear the dog's cries. Duprez's sound was, arguably, beautiful; at least some people thought so, even if two doctors, driven to study the physiology of singing by the occasion, claimed that most people thought the voice was forced and false. Whether it was 'pathological' or not – I'd prefer, at worse, 'pathogenic' in the sense that so many unnatural new activities of the nineteenth century, like sitting long hours at a desk or riding on a train, were thought to make one ill – the tenor's high C did, even its detractors admitted, 'transport and dominate with its power'. It was musical and in the minds of many opened up radically new interpretative possibilities.

The two stories also diverge in that gender is irrelevant in the lab and thoroughly exigent at the Opéra. Neither in this experiment nor in most of Magendie's others does it matter whether the dog is a he or a she. Canine sounds do not vary in pitch or timbre by sex as human ones do except in special circumstances. Duprez on the other hand stands near, if not exactly at, the beginning of a new style of tenor – that is, male – singing: he seems to be the first modern tenor; our sort of tenor; the first man to inhabit a certain sort of voice, which, by the early twentieth century, had come to be taken for granted. 'We have forgotten', Gregory Bloch writes, 'that any other conception of singing was ever possible'. 'The Three Tenors' singing in a head voice is imaginable only in a Monty Python or Saturday Night Live skit. It is thinkable not even as a Civil-War-battle sort of historical re-enactment. It could only be parody: 'The Three Counter-Tenors?'

The modern – post-1837 – tenor voice has taken on something of a masculine mythos in popular culture. It is eerily powerful. Caruso could break a glass with his high notes. (It is true that Ella Fitzgerald accomplished the same feat in TV ads, but that seemed evidence more of the fidelity of Memorex tapes than of the qualities of the soprano voice as a category.) Duprez himself wrote that he was swept away by the 'manly accents' of Arnold's Act IV aria and produced a chest voice more or less unconsciously. The new tenor is, in short, more male than the old one.

That said, there are also things that these stories of embodied voices, the dog's and the tenor's, have in common. That the two instances can be connected at all testifies to a new faith, a conviction that the yelps of a dog *in extremis* and the sounds of a singer on the stage have a physiology in common. From the fact that the canine

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voice – even if it is observed not in the full-throated natural sounds of the hunt but in the highly artificial laboratory setting – can be observed to work more like a violin than a flute, the same can be said about the human voice. Vivisected dogs thus resolved an old problem about how singers sing.

But more to the point, the two stories elide sex and the whole, enormous cultural universe that swirls about it like a galaxy around its centre. None of Bloch's sources seems to have made much of the most obvious so-called secondary sexual characteristic at play in the debate about the lowered or raised larynx in singing: the Adam's apple. Dr Johnson defines it as 'in anatomy, a prominent part of the throat'. No sex. By the mid-nineteenth century it had come to be thought of as something characteristically male, a structure that in folklore represented the Fall: 'The forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge got stuck, they say, in his [Adam's] throat'.[1] Nothing is made of the fact that, by and large, the angle at the line of fusion of the thyroid laminae is 120° for women and a more acute 90° for men.

Even the text at the heart of Bloch's essay is vague about sex. Diday's and Pétrequin's *Mémoire* is about a 'new species of voice', ungendered except for what grammar demands – a feminine ending. 'Tenor' and 'singer' are mostly interchangeable; the whole discussion of timbre, for example, is in terms of the length and shape of organs, a naso-laryngial system common to men and women. This is not surprising. The operatic voice is human.

I observe these examples of sex and species being more – or less – exigent because they emphasise the claim implicit in Bloch's essay and in this special issue: any discussion of gender and its relationship to the body is rooted not only in ontological claims (what is the foundation of difference?) or epistemological ones (how do we know about difference?), but also in political and more generally ethical commitments. The nineteenth-century male performer does not fit the woman/voice/body/performance vs. composer/work/libretto/music binary, but neither I suspect do sopranos and ballerinas if any pressure is put on the distinction which is itself so demonstrably an element in a rooted sex/gender system. I doubt there is – or more to the point in these historical articles, *was* – anything more inscrutable or strange about the male than the female voice except in particular instances.

The task of the historian is to excavate these instances and restore their contexts. Any moment in the politics of gender in opera and ballet, and in critical studies of opera and ballet, is intelligible only if it is embedded in the broader cultural contexts of the world in which it subsists. By contexts I mean both the world of viewers and performers as they face each other in the theatre or mingle in the wings and the world beyond the theatre. The gendered embodiment of a voice, understood as other than a technical matter of producing sound, is exigent when embodiment *tout court* is exigent.

This suggests that students of opera and ballet, instead of playing their versions of the oppressive libretto/liberated voice game, might want to think about other combinations in relation to histories outside the theatre. As a complete outsider, let me propose 'the troubled libretto/troubled voice' of the nineteenth-century

[1] Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (London, 1966), 6.

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operatic father. I make this suggestion for two reasons. First, it would be a contribution to the history of masculinity generally. For various reasons, the history of men as fathers has developed slowly.[2] Heroism, homosexuality, athleticism, Classicism and Romanticism all made more pressing claims. And, conversely, histories of motherhood – and femininity – seemed so much more important in the development of new gender ideologies and practices. They were the back-story of feminism that has been so central to the emergence of women's history as a sub-discipline with a mission. In early modern studies of gender men did matter: *When Fathers Ruled* is a famous example.[3] Seventeenth-century child-rearing manuals overwhelmingly emphasise the pedagogic centrality of the *paterfamilias* as the moral centre of his small household kingdom. This all changed by the time opera reached its heyday. By the early nineteenth century childrearing was assumed to be a woman's business; dads look on haplessly. Think of the Victorian genre painter William Powell Frith's *The Birthday Party* in which the supposed head of the house looks out at viewers as if the happy familial business that is the picture's subject is somehow not his business. Fathers in novels do not fare well either. Their place in opera, I suggest, is fraught as well.

This brings me to the second motivation for my suggestion. If the tenor voice from the chest speaks in 'manly accents', then what might one want to say about the baritone or bass-baritone of fathers: Rigoletto, Philippe II, Giorgio Germont and my favourite poignant, failed dad, Wotan, to name but a few. (Are there any tenor fathers?) I will not venture further into foreign turf except to say that if I were interested in the male opera and ballet performer I would want to see him in relation to the social-historical status of the roles he performs. Gendered embodiment, to repeat my point, is important only in relationship to more general ethical matters.

I might give this point a different inflection in the context of Marian Smith's article on the danseur. The article performs, among other tasks, the important social-historical work of recovery. Looking back through the eyes of Théophile Gautier and, a century later, through Levinson's, all that we can see is the feminine 'ballet blanc'. (*Blanc* seems to be the colour of a refined voice and a refined dancer.) Just as we once recognised no black and relatively few women writers in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century corpus, the male dancer is barely visible through the mists of a long critical tradition. That we are missing something Smith proves. Yes, there were considerably more female than male dancers in Paris between 1830 and 1850, but not that many more.

This is a remarkable and important social-historical fact that we might want to put in context by extending the data backwards to the Restoration and forwards to Napoleon III. The bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Philippe was an odd moment both in the history of French kingship and in representing the king; no ruler before or after was ever satirised as a pear.[4] I wonder whether the regimes of Louis XVIII and

[2] For exceptions, see John Tosh, *Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven, 1999); and John Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (New York, 1996).
[3] Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1983).
[4] See Sandy Petrey, 'Pears in History', *Representations*, 35 (1991), 52–71.

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Charles X restored as well some of the dance conventions of the *ancien régime* and whether elements of Second Empire masculine style translated into ballet practice. One suspects that art does not track politics so nicely, but it would be worth knowing.

In addition to gathering more figures, the social history of male and female dancing needs to be embedded in a more general social history of spectatorship on and off the stage: we need a history of the devotee; of the back stage Johnny (I am thinking here of Jean Béraud's 1889 painting *Les Coulisses de l'Opéra* with its gentlemen in black evening dress, women in white tutus and a few brightly dressed and silly male dancers in the far background); of the post-ballet party; of the production and circulation of the visual art of dance. Degas and his followers so dominate our vision of nineteenth-century French dance that it is difficult to conjure up an image of the male dancer except in terms of some neo-classical friezes and parodies of them.[5] In other words, we need to know whether the male dancer disappeared beyond the stage even if he remained present on it; and if so, how.

But a social history of the male dancer also needs a cultural history; recovery of the past needs recovery of its meanings. Smith has begun this enterprise; clearly the *ballet d'action* is not just the dance of a vanquished past while the *ballet blanc* that of a Romantic future. But 'history' lies more heavily on French dance than on any other nineteenth-century national tradition. Male dancers there surely carried the suspicious traces of the *ancien régime* court into the post-1789 era. The male dancer thus had more than an image problem; he had a past.

He also had the problem of 'institutionalised heterosexual male voyeurism', the only kind of voyeurism on public offer before the early twentieth century. He had the problem of genre and gender. Being male was incidental to playing a part in the comic forms, in the bright cheery displays Smith writes about; being female was essential to *La Sylphide*. And the historian of the male dancer has a problem too. It is important to discover that men danced in considerable numbers; it is perhaps even more important to discover why the existence of the danseur has been so easily erased. However, the great challenge is to understand what these facts mean. I am not advocating a radical cultural turn, but I want to remind readers that historians in the 1970s moved in the direction of culture because social history alone could not explain how gender, among other categories, was created and sustained.

Karen Henson's essay offers a finely textured account of how implausible – I am tempted to say silly – anti-performance rhetoric is. Wagner has it right: on whom else but actors, singers and bandsman can the 'artistic ends' of a composer rest? We know now that live performance – the interaction of audience and performer – affects the neurophysiology of listening. Music performed is felt differently than music heard in other ways. But leaving these new facts aside, it seems a most peculiar idea that music, and particularly opera and ballet, could exist outside performance whatever Verdi (and indeed Wagner) said about the subject.

All musicology must be in some sense 'carnal musicology', to use Elisabeth Le Guin's phrase for a way of thinking about music that demands of the performer that

[5] See Richard Kendall, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism* (London, Chicago and New Haven, 1996).

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she become the 'composer's agent' and that the 'experience of becoming him is grounded in and expressed through the medium of the tactile'. 'I come to know what the composer supposed me to be', she writes.[6] A performer inhabits, if not a composer's body or vice versa – Le Guin the cellist might aspire to have Boccherini the virtuoso inhabit her – then a composer's mind or his mind's ear. (Le Guin's point is, of course, to break down the distinctions between body and mind, and between mind and ear; to show that thinking about how a performance looks – about its theatricality – is an essential aspect of thinking about how phrases sound.) Any composer of opera and ballet who is not mad would, I should think, have to engage in the kind of negotiations Verdi engaged in with Maurel however much they might hope to be writing for posterity or for themselves alone.

In short, opera and ballet, and music generally, live through bodies even when strange electronic instruments make the sounds that enter our ears and set up the cascade of electrochemistry that we hear as sound. And where there is embodiment there is also the question of gender. Not everybody in every circumstance exists as male or female but everybody exists as a body. And this makes the questions raised by these three articles important not just for opera studies but for the history of how fleshly humans make culture.

[6] Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2006), 24–5, 36.

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