

Céline Frigau Manning

## Staging and Acting Without a Director.

### Expressive Gestures at the Paris Théâtre Royal Italien

Although the role of stage director did not exist in the first half of the nineteenth century,<sup>1</sup> spectators often expressed their desire to have one person responsible for operatic staging, »like a captain sailing a ship«.<sup>2</sup> There was nobody to do so at the Théâtre royal Italien (1815–1848). But as illustrated by spectators' accounts, many of the Théâtre's singers, such as Manuel García, Giuditta Pasta or Maria Malibran, were well-known for their acting. This did not mean however that, having no stage director, they could act as they pleased: their performative freedom must be considered within the limits of the audience's expectations, the administration's demands, and the figurative codes of the time.

This said, how can we hope to understand such spectators' expectations when audiences at the time considered these criteria to be so obvious, usual and implicit, that they needed neither explanation nor justification? As Théophile Gautier states:

»L'œuvre du chanteur ou de la danseuse s'évanouit tout entière avec eux, et il faut, pour en retrouver l'impression vivante, aller feuilleter les mémoires et les feuilletons du temps, et encore vous ne trouvez là que des descriptions incomplètement indiquées, comme on les fait lorsqu'on parle de ces choses que tout le monde connaît.«<sup>3</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> It did not exist at this time in its modern meaning. The role emerged as an artistic process in the second half of the nineteenth century and developed with the concept of interpretation of the whole musical drama, under the banner of a critical and creative relationship. See Gaston Baty: *Le metteur en scène* [1944], new edition with an introduction by Béatrice Picon-Vallin, postface by Gaston Lieber, Arles 2004 (*Mettre en scène*). Gaston Baty was one of the first critics to have defined staging in its modern meaning. In Italy, the practice began later than in France, and the terms of »regista« (»stage director«) and »regia« (»stage directing«) appeared only in 1932; cf. Gerardo Guccini: *Direzione scenica e regia*, in: *Storia dell'opera italiana*, ed. by Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli, Torino 1988 (*Biblioteca di cultura musicale*), vol. 5, p. 123–174.
- <sup>2</sup> »A dirigere gli spettacoli convien porre un solo personaggio, come un solo pilota a regolare una nave«. Carlo Ritorni: *Consigli sull'arte di dirigere gli spettacoli* [1825], in: Daniele Seragnoli: *L'industria del teatro. Carlo Ritorni e lo spettacolo a Reggio Emilia nell'Ottocento*, Bologna 1987 (*Proscenio*), p. 339–382, see p. 340.
- <sup>3</sup> »[...] the art of the singer or dancer vanishes entirely with them, and, in order to find once more the living impression, we must search through the mémoires and magazines of the time, and still we find there only incomplete descriptions, as when we describe things that everybody already knows« (All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.) Théophile Gautier: *Les beautés de l'Opéra. Souvenirs de théâtre d'art et de critique*, in: *Les beautés de l'Opéra, ou Chefs-d'œuvre lyriques illustrés par les premiers artistes de Paris et de London, avec un texte explicatif rédigé par Théophile Gautier, Jules Janin et Philarète Chasles*, ed. by J[ean]-B[aptiste] Giralton, Paris 1845, Paris 1904, p. 69–70, see p. 70.

How may we rely then on spectators' impressions – or on their fleeting memories – to capture stage practices which, to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, may be collectively orchestrated without resulting from the organising action of a conductor? How are we then to fix such dynamic scenic practices which, though regulated (or at least regularly recurring), were never the product of a manual of fixed rules?<sup>4</sup>

In order to examine these questions, I will first identify the various individuals who took part in the staging of the productions of the Paris Italian Opera House in the first half of the nineteenth century. I will then attempt to resituate the artists' scenic practices in the light of the crucial notion of »expressive gesture« and the reception criteria of the audiences. More generally, I will analyse, by way of several examples, the processes of creation, production and reception at work in the *Théâtre Italien*, by comparing different sources such as administrative archives, iconography, spectators' accounts, manuals and critical writings.<sup>5</sup>

**Staging Without a Stage Director** If the *Théâtre Italien* had no stage director, who then were the various individuals who took part in the »staging« of the productions and coordinated the actors' positions on stage, their gestures and scenic interactions? The theatre's administrative archives are particularly useful in helping us to understand this apparent enigma.

As in other theatres, the staff librettist not only wrote libretti and arranged them for new productions, but was given responsibility for the staging: »en ma qualité d'auteur, [je suis] chargé de l'arrangement et mise en scène de tous les ouvrages«, wrote Luigi Balocchi, author of Rossini's *Il Viaggio a Reims*, *Moïse et Pharaon* and *Le Siège de Corinthe*.<sup>6</sup> This is what Luigi Balocchi's 1818 contract,<sup>7</sup> and the decree of the same year, prove: »Il est tenu d'assister à toutes les répétitions qui se feront au théâtre, de surveiller le règle-

4 Pierre Bourdieu: Structures, habitus, pratiques, in: *Le sens pratique*, Paris 1980, p. 87–109, see p. 88–89. Though acting manuals are precious documents, they must be used with care. Do they indeed reflect the gestures of the time? Do they record past, and supposedly lost, practices? Or do they rather make propositions for the future, according to the ideals of their authors?

5 My extended study on these questions is forthcoming in 2014 from Éditions Honoré Champion, Paris, in the series »Romantisme et Modernités«, under the title *Chanteurs en scène. L'œil du spectateur au Théâtre-Italien (1815–1848)*.

6 AN AJ 13-112, letter from Balocchi to Delaferté, 1821.

7 AN AJ 13-109, contract of the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1818, quoted by Janet Lynn Johnson: *The Theatre italien and opera and theatrical life in the Restoration*. Paris: 1818–1827, 1988, PhD in Musicology supervised by Philip Gossett, University of Chicago, Faculty of the division of the Humanities, 1988, p. 421.

ment des actions, et d'indiquer toutes les intentions scéniques et dramatiques». <sup>8</sup> The reports also show that the librettist, along with the members of the administration and the official composer, decided on the distribution of roles.

In his capacity as »composer and head of staging and artists«, Ferdinando Paër took care of musical arrangements, but this was not his only responsibility, as the same 1818 decree demonstrates:

»Comme chef des artistes du Théâtre royal Italien, il est chargé de surveiller toutes les répétitions, la mise en scène et l'exécution théâtrale. Il assiste aux trois premières représentations de tout ouvrage nouveau ou remis [...]. Ses ordres sont immédiatement exécutoires pour tous les artistes du chant et de l'orchestre de ce dernier Théâtre.«<sup>9</sup>

His role was thus less artistic than logistical and disciplinary. But Paër did not entirely honour his commitments, and the administration issued several warnings concerning his failure to attend rehearsals. <sup>10</sup>

As for his successor, Rossini did not hesitate to delegate questions of staging or eschew them altogether, even when they concerned his own operas. In 1825, he asked the composer Michele Carafa to take care of the staging of *Semiramide*, and even gave him his authors' rights:

»Mon cher Carafa. Puisqu'on se propose de mettre en scène mon opéra *Sémiramide*, et que je ne m'occupe, tu le sais, de rien de ce genre, je te prie de t'en charger en te donnant la latitude la plus complète pour tous les arrangements que tu jugeras convenable de faire. Comme ce travail sera ton œuvre, il sera aussi ta propriété, et tous les droits d'auteur, soit au théâtre, soit au dehors, t'appartiendront.«<sup>11</sup>

When Rossini speaks of staging here, he is thinking of the production's musical arrangements rather than its visual aspects. If the composer was so little interested in his own opera's musical arrangements, we may imagine how little he was involved in its visual staging.

In contrast to Rossini's apparent disinterest, other composers such as Donizetti or Verdi later proved exceptionally implicated in the staging of their operas. For the creation of *Roberto Devereux* in 1838, for example, the journal *La France musicale* noted the following:

8 AN AJ 13-109, decree of the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1818.

9 Ibid.

10 BnF, BmO, AD 44, letter from the direction to Paër, 20<sup>th</sup> of July 1824, p. 27.

11 »My dear Carafa. Since they have accepted to stage my opera *Semiramide*, and that I, as you know, do not take care of such things, I pray you take charge of it, and give you the fullest latitude for all arrangements you deem fit. Moreover, as this labour will result in your own work of art, the latter will also be your property, and all copyright, either in the theatre or outside of it, will belong to you.« Letter quoted by Antonio Zanolini: *Biografia di Gioacchino Rossini*, Bologna 1875, p. 186.

«Roberto Devereux est le premier ouvrage que nous devons à la nouvelle administration du Théâtre Italien; elle a fait venir le maestro Donizetti, qui a présidé lui-même aux répétitions et à la mise en scène de son opéra.»<sup>12</sup>

A document written in the composer's hand, conserved at the Bergamo Museo Donizettiano, attests to the fact that, for *Don Pasquale* in 1843, Donizetti even designed the actors' costumes with great care.<sup>13</sup> We see then that the composer's involvement in staging depended more on his personal interest and preference than on his administrative situation.

The 1818 decree also specifies that the composer must report to the stage manager. In another decree three years later, the stage manager's responsibilities are described in more detail:

«Le directeur de la scène est chargé de l'exécution du répertoire arrêté par l'administrateur. Il a pour cet objet, autorité sur tous les sujets du chant, de la danse, de l'orchestre, et employés du Théâtre.  
[...] Il surveille les représentations et répétitions [...].  
Toutes les feuilles de présence dûment signées, doivent lui être remises exactement.»<sup>14</sup>

Such roll-call sheets allowed the stage manager to determine fines for absent artists. As specified in the decree, he also dealt with all requests for costumes or decorations. The 1825 decree increased his powers even more.<sup>15</sup> The stage manager was thus clearly not the precursor of the stage director: his role was above all disciplinary.

He had beneath him the masters of singing and staging. These individuals were even more active in the field than the stage manager, as shown by an undated decree of the *Académie royale de Musique*, which shared its administration with the *Théâtre Italien* from 1818 to 1827:

«Les chefs du chant et de la scène se trouveront chaque jour, depuis dix heures du matin jusqu'à trois heures après-midi, au lieu des répétitions, pour y faire répéter les rôles. Ils assisteront aux représentations et répétitions, et se tiendront dans les coulisses pour placer et diriger les chœurs [...]. Ils

12 «Roberto Devereux is the first work to come out of the Théâtre Italien's new administration, who called upon the maestro Donizetti to oversee the rehearsals and staging». *La France musicale*, 30<sup>th</sup> of December 1838, p. 416.

13 IV 4° B 2, facsimile, quoted by Luca Zoppelli: *En vieux Lion moderne*, in: *Don Pasquale*, ed. by Livio Aragona and Federico Fornoni, Bergamo 2010, p. 59–70, see p. 64.

14 «The stage manager is responsible for the performance of the repertoire chosen by the administrator. To do this, he has authority over all artists involved in singing, dance, orchestra and employees. [...] He oversees the performances and rehearsals [...]. All roll-call sheets, duly signed, must be handed in to him without fail.» AN AJ 13-109, decree of the 13<sup>th</sup> of January 1821.

15 AN AJ 13-109, decree of the 14<sup>th</sup> of March 1825.

veilleront également aux entrées et sorties des acteurs, et généralement à tous les mouvements de la scène.<sup>16</sup>

According to the same decree, the masters of singing and staging had power over all the actors, who could not change the order of their place on stage, under threat of a fine. They also checked that the costume indicated by the costume-maker was observed.

The singing master of the *Théâtre Italien* also played a pedagogical role. According to the 1821 regulations, the singing master took care of movement on the stage and theatrical execution, and gave advice to the doubles and beginners for singing as well as for acting.<sup>17</sup> To help him, he had an assistant under his command.<sup>18</sup> He submitted his reports to the administration, like the 1827 report where he scrutinised all the artists, and remarked of Laure Cinti:

»La nommer c'est en faire l'éloge. Comme chanteuse elle ne peut aller au-delà; c'est la perfection même. Il est à désirer qu'elle s'occupe des études qui lui restent à faire, comme comédienne.«<sup>19</sup>

Like Laure Cinti, many singers, if they had not arrived direct from Italy, were taught in the classes of the *Conservatoire national supérieur de musique* which was renamed *École royale de chant et de déclamation* during the time of the Restoration and was directly affiliated to the administration of the *Académie royale de Musique* and the *Théâtre Italien*. Each student received a stipend so that, once their studies were finished, they may be employed by one or the other of these theatres. This school offered many courses in singing and declamation, but despite the development of the institution, the common tendency at this time was to doubt the virtues of all acting training, subscribing rather to the belief that there was no better school than the stage itself.<sup>20</sup>

As illustrated by extracts from the administration's correspondence, another important figure in the theatre's hierarchy was also given responsibility for a production's scenic aspects. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1825, Vicomte de La Rochefoucauld wrote the following note to an unknown recipient:

16 »The masters of singing and staging must meet each day at the rehearsal space, from ten in the morning until three in the afternoon, in order to rehearse the roles. They will attend performances and rehearsals, and will be present backstage in order to place and direct the choirs [...]. They will oversee the entrances and exits of the actors, and more generally take care of all movement on the stage.« AN AJ 13-109, decree of the *Académie royale de Musique*, undated.

17 AN O 3-1737, decree of the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1821, chapter II, art. 37.

18 AN AJ 13-109, decree of the 4<sup>th</sup> of December 1822.

19 »To pronounce her name is to praise her. As a singer she could not be better; she is perfection itself. It is desirable though that she does some necessary study regarding her acting.« AN AJ 13-145, [11], report from the singing masters, for the budget of 1827.

20 See for example AN AJ 13-112, letter by Delaferté to Viotti, 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 1821.

«Il est important de ne rien négliger pour la mise en scène d'un ouvrage annoncé depuis si longtemps et si impatientement attendu [Il Crociato in Egitto]. Je vous autorise à permettre à M. Milon d'aller à Louvois donner des leçons de pantomime aux artistes chargés des divers rôles de la pièce.»<sup>21</sup>

Louis Milon was the ballet master of the *Académie royale*, responsible for the choreography of the ballets and entertainment pieces performed at the *Théâtre Italien*. It seems he was reluctant to accept the Vicomte's proposition, as precisely a month later, Duplantys, the administrator of the *Théâtre Italien*, stated the following: »M. Milon se chargera déci-dément de la mise en scène de *Il Crociato* (en ce qui concerne la pantomime et la danse).<sup>22</sup> It is significant that Duplantys feels the need to inform three other key people responsible for staging: Meyerbeer, the composer of the work, Rossini, the chief composer of the *Théâtre*, and the manager Carlo Severini.<sup>23</sup>

Different figures of the *Théâtre Italien* thus actively contributed to staging practices. Administrative archives allow us to understand their actions not in terms of artistic processes, but rather in terms of logistics and disciplinary organisation. The entire artistic aspect of staging did not depend on these individuals. This said, journalists' opinions sometimes held sway and were able to alter and influence a work's visual aesthetics. In 1824, for the premiere of *La Donna del lago*, Rossini had a band come out onto the stage. This innovation was unanimously disapproved of, both for the band's false notes as for the scenic chaos such an eruption apparently caused:

«Cela n'est pas heureux, soit parce que les papiers attachés aux instruments de ces Écossais prouvent que ce n'est ni de mémoire, ni d'inspiration qu'ils jouent leurs airs nationaux, soit parce qu'ils ne marchent pas d'accord avec l'orchestre en chef, même quand ils jouent juste.»<sup>24</sup>

The journalist goes as far to suggest that the fake Scottish musicians be given fake instruments, and that the music be played by the orchestra, in order to maintain »the scenic effect.« As for Castil-Blaze, he cannot allow Rodrigo's voice to be drowned out by the on-stage musicians, and suggests that the actor be accompanied, but that the musi-

21 »It is important to neglect nothing in the staging of a work which has been advertised for such a long time and waited for so impatiently [Il Crociato]. I authorise you to allow Mr. Milon to go to Louvois to give lessons in pantomime to the artists responsible for the various roles.« Letter by La Rochefoucauld, 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1825, quoted by Jean Mongrédien: *Le Théâtre Italien de Paris, 1801-1831. Chronologie et documents*, 8 vol., Lyon/Venise 2008 (Perpetuum mobile), vol. 6, p. 169.

22 »M. Milon alone will finally take care of the staging of *Il Crociato* (concerning the pantomime and dance).« BnF, BmO, LAS Th. It., section 22, letter from Duplantys, 4<sup>th</sup> of September 1825, quoted by Mongrédien, *Le Théâtre Italien de Paris*, vol. 6, p. 196.

23 Ibid.

24 »It does not work, either because the pages attached to the band's instruments prove that it is neither from memory nor from inspiration that the Scots play their national airs, either because they do not work in harmony with the conductor even when they play in tune.« *La Pandore*, 9<sup>th</sup> of September 1824.

cians remain hidden backstage.<sup>25</sup> The press thus plays an ad hoc advisory role in matters of staging and dramaturgy. And in fact, as we read in a letter written two weeks later, the administration reacted quickly to these journalistic remonstrances:

»Le public a manifesté avec force le désir que la musique sur le théâtre de *La Donna del lago* fût supprimée et les journaux se sont à cet égard montrés les interprètes du vœu général.«<sup>26</sup>

This episode proves not only the extent to which problems of a musical nature could coalesce with those of performance, but also the influence journalists had in matters of staging, and the attention the administration gave to their assessments of scenic practices.

The artistic aspect of staging depended primarily on the first singers, some of whom obtained the contractual right to direct staging practices. This was the case for Giuditta Pasta, who signed a contract in Paris in 1826 stipulating the following:

»Dans tous les opéras où jouera Madame Pasta, ce sera elle seule qui aura le choix des acteurs, la distribution des rôles, la direction absolue pour tout ce qui regarde les répétitions et tout autre pour la mise en scène des dits opéras. [...] Personne n'aura le droit d'intervenir aux répétitions, ni de s'immiscer en rien pour la représentation de ces opéras; bien entendu que Madame Pasta respectera le rang des acteurs.«<sup>27</sup>

Not all first singers were able to obtain such austere mandates, but even without such contracts, they nevertheless sought to take full scenic control. The administration sought to limit the extent of this influence, as demonstrated by the 1822 decree which soberly stated that:

»Tout artiste qui ferait pendant les répétitions quelque observation étrangère au rôle qui lui est personnellement confié, ou troublerait d'une manière quelconque la tranquillité des répétitions, ou mises en scène, subira une amende.«<sup>28</sup>

It was then agreed that the artists' observations would only be welcomed on the condition that they were made after the singing masters and ballet masters had carried out the

25 *Journal des débats*, 9<sup>th</sup> of September 1824.

26 »The audience has shown with force their desire that the music on stage during *La Donna del lago* be removed, and the newspapers have shown themselves in this respect to be the interpreters of a general will.« Letter from Habeneck, director of the Théâtre Italien, to Paër, 21<sup>st</sup> of September 1824, BnF, BmO, AD 44.

27 »In all the operas in which she sings, she alone will have the choice of actors, the distribution of roles, and absolute control over all the staging rehearsals. [...] Nobody will have the right to intervene in rehearsals, or to influence the performance of these operas.« John Ebers: *Seven years of the King's Theatre* by John Ebers, late manager of the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, London 1828, p. 388.

28 »Any artist who, during rehearsals, makes any observation unrelated to his own personal role, or who disturbs in any way whatsoever the peace of rehearsals or stagings, shall receive a fine.« AN AJ 13-109, decree of the 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1825.

staging. If the singers were only allowed to intervene afterwards, what contributions could they have made to the staging process which would have been tolerated by this decree?

We of course need to be careful in our interpretation of these documents; do these regulations attest to the real, quotidian authority of the different managers of the theatre, or rather to the simple need to put such authority, however illusory, in writing, in order to preserve it from the artists' influence and control? Are we not then in the presence of an explicit power struggle? In 1824, an anonymous observer made the following complaint:

«Depuis un an je suis avec soin la mise en scène des ouvrages; et je ne reviens pas de ma surprise de ne pas voir une personne chargée de mettre en scène [...]. Quand après avoir appris les rôles de mémoire les acteurs arrivent aux répétitions sur le théâtre chacun s'arrange comme il l'entend.»<sup>29</sup>

In order to further elucidate these practices, we will focus on the artists of the *Théâtre Italien* in an attempt to resituate their gestural practices in the context of the reception criteria of their audiences.

**Acting Without a Stage Director. A hierarchy of expressive gestures?** What does acting without a stage director mean? How did the singers of the *Théâtre Italien* act on stage, and how may we qualify their gestures and corporal movements? The concept of »expression« is crucial here. Without entering into philosophical reflections which often remain distant from those of spectators, I prefer to attempt to understand here what the notion of »expression«, when applied to the idea of gesture, may have meant for such spectators, and how it reinforced commonly accepted gestural hierarchies.

In Morrocchesi's *Lezioni*, one of the most frequently used manuals at the time, gesture is defined as »il movimento esteriore del corpo e del volto; una delle prime espressioni del sentimento, date all'uomo dalla natura«.<sup>30</sup> Gesture is thus immediately associated here with the notion of expression, and this association is a reminder of the myth, common since antiquity, that the language of the body is above and beyond that of words, its eloquence being thus as immediate as it is universal. Outside the restricted circle of actors, Morrocchesi wants his advice to be useful to all artists, and seeks to identify a gestural palette common to all artistic disciplines. The concept of expression, at the

29 »For over a year I have followed with care the staging of the works; and I cannot get over my surprise at not seeing someone in charge of staging [...]. After having learnt the roles by heart, the actors arrive at the theatre for rehearsals, and each one places himself as he likes.« Anonymous letter, [Paris], [1825], BnF, BMO, LAS Th. It., pièce 22, 36 (2).

30 »[...] the exterior movement of the body and the face, one of the first expressions of sentiment, given to man by nature«. Antonio Morrocchesi: *Lezioni di declamazione e d'arte teatrale di Antonio Morrocchesi, professore nell'I. e R. Accademia delle belle arti di Firenze*, Firenze 1832, facsimile edition: Roma 1991, p. 243.



meeting point of interiority and exteriority, is for him the common gestural denominator across the various arts.

Morrocchesi's manual, like others, follows a gestural hierarchy inherited from the tradition of Western rhetoric – which focuses attention on the upper part of the orator's body – and transfers this hierarchy to a theatrical context. The most noble genres privilege the face, the arms, the hands. The comic genres, closer to popular traditions, give greater importance to the body's lower half. Although, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, stage techniques imported by Italian actors eroded these divisions, they nevertheless persisted in nineteenth century opera.<sup>31</sup> To give one example among many, Théophile Gautier, during the creation of Donizetti's *Parisina* at the *Théâtre Italien* in 1838, once more made use of a classical reference in order to describe Giulia Grisi, mentioning only the upper part of her body:

»Mlle Grisi est merveilleusement belle! ses épaules, son cou et ses bras peuvent le disputer de perfection aux statues antiques les plus renommées. [...] Assurément, la couronne irait bien sur ces bandeaux de cheveux noirs et sur ce front d'ambre pâle.«<sup>32</sup>

Now, at the top of the gestural hierarchy are the expressions of the eyes: »Quando parlo del gesto, intendo parlare tanto dell'espressione degli occhi, quanto dei movimenti delle braccia, della testa, delle diverse posizioni del petto, ecc.«<sup>33</sup> declares Giraltoni, whose manual contains many revealing images on the role of the gaze. One need only read Morando de' Rizzoni's description of Pasta's acting in the finale of *Otello's Act I*:

»Niente di più commovente, e di più vero dell'ultima scena allorquando sopravviene il suo adorato Otello; [...] prima spalanca gli occhi per curiosità amorosa [...]. Se la guardi nell'istante che apre la bocca, [...] ed ha le pupille saltellanti, e talvolta mezze nascoste sulle palpebre, e tale altra che non lasciano vedere che il bianco dell'occhio, che poi si chiude, non puoi che partecipare della ebbrezza del suo struggimento. Indi vibra angolari le amorose pupille in Otello, tiene il capo da una parte, la bocca semi-aperta e spirante lusinghe, imita col collo la lascivetta palomba, tutta tutta è amore.«<sup>34</sup>

31 Cf. Alessandro di Profio: *La révolution des Bouffons. L'opéra italien au Théâtre de Monsieur 1789–1792*, Paris 2003 (Sciences de la musique), and *La »Querelle des Bouffons« dans la vie culturelle française du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. by Andrea Fabiano, Paris 2005 (Sciences de la musique).

32 »Mademoiselle Grisi is wonderfully beautiful! Her shoulders, neck and arms can rival in perfection those of the most famous antique statues [...]. A crown would perfectly sit atop those locks of black hair, above such a brow of pale amber.« Théophile Gautier: *Histoire de l'art dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq ans*, Leipzig: Hetzel, 1858, vol. I, p. 112.

33 »By gesture, I mean the expression of the eyes as much as the movement of the arms, the head.« Leone Giraltoni: *Guida teorico-pratica ad uso dell'artista cantante*, Bologna 1864, p. 59.

34 »Nothing more moving and more true than the last scene when her beloved Otello appears; [...] she begins by opening her eyes wide, out of adoring curiosity [...]. If you look at her at the instant when she opens her mouth, [...] with her bright pupils sometimes hidden under her eyelids, sometimes showing only the white of the eyes which then close straight away, you cannot help but participate in the delirium of her emotion. She then allows her pupils to slip sideways towards

Everything here is a play of the eyes: firstly between Desdemona and Otello, secondly between the actress and her audience. With this image of a »languishing dove«, we are far from any realism (an anachronistic term at the time of the *Théâtre royal Italien*, which would be considered some decades later as a »néologisme«, defined as »l'attachement à la reproduction de la nature sans idéal«).<sup>35</sup> Expressive gesture thus reveals the love and innocence which define Desdemona's character, and for the spectator, as Rizzoni himself makes clear, we are here in the profound »truth« and »emotion« of performance.

The mouth is another crucial gestural locus, both in my present exploration of scenic practices as well as in singers' manuals at the time. Questions of visual aesthetics and vocal technique are both pertinent here, for the position of the mouth had to be simultaneously favourable to the emission of the voice, all the while remaining pleasant to look at. On this point, little has changed since the observations of Pierfrancesco Tosi in 1723 and Giambattista Mancini in 1776: the latter recommended that singers not open the mouth too wide like »a small oven«, as this renders the face ugly like the »arse of a chicken which has just laid an egg«.<sup>36</sup> Nicola Tacchinardi regretted open mouths, which gave the impression that the voice had to »come out of the hosepipe of a fountain«.<sup>37</sup> As for the singers from the *Théâtre Italien*, Luigi Lablache is of the same opinion in his manual of 1840,<sup>38</sup> and Manuel García (son) forbids all »oval-shaped

Otello, holds her head to one side, mouth slightly open in an expression of hope, as if imitating with her neck a languishing dove. She is no longer anything but love.« Luigi Morando De Rizzoni: *La Pasta nell'Otello*, dialogo del nob. dott. Luigi Morando De Rizzoni, Verona 1830, p. 14.

- 35 »[...] the commitment to the reproduction of nature without ideal«. Émile Littré: *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, Paris 1872–1877, online: <http://artflx.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/dicos/pubdicorlook.pl?strippedhw=r%C3%A9alisme>, consulted the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 2014.
- 36 Pierfrancesco Tosi: *Opinioni de' Cantori antichi, e moderni, o sieno Osservazioni sopra il canto figurato di Pierfrancesco Tosi accademico filarmonico. Dedicata a sua Eccellenza Mylord Peterborough generale di sbarco dell'arme reali della gran Bretagna*, Bologna 1723, facsimile edition, translation by Johann Friedrich Agricola and Erwin R. Jacoby, Celle 1966; Giambattista Mancini: *Pensieri, e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato di Giambattista Mancini, Mestro di canto della Corte Imperiale, e Accademico Filarmonico*, Vienna 1774, abridged French translation: *L'art du chant figuré de J. B. Mancini, maître de chant de la cour impériale de Vienne, et membre de l'académie des philharmoniques de Bologna*, traduit de l'italien par M. A. Désaugiers, Vienna and Paris 1776, p. 24: »un petit four«; »figure hideuse et exactement semblable à celle d'un muffle«; p. 25: »parfaitement semblable au cul d'une poule qui vient de pondre«.
- 37 Nicola Tacchinardi: *Dell'opera in musica sul teatro italiano e de' suoi difetti*. Opuscolo di Niccola Tacchinardi artista toscano. Seconda edizione, Firenze 1833, facsimile edition by Francesca Gatta, Modena 1995, p. 27.
- 38 Louis Lablache: *Méthode complète de chant ou analyse raisonnée des principes d'après lesquels on doit diriger les études pour développer la voix, la rendre légère et pour former le goût, avec exemples démonstratifs, exercices et vocalises graduées*, Paris 1840, p. 2, facsimile edition by Jeanne Roudet, *Chant*. Volume V, Paris 2005, p. 12).

mouths (like fish)».39 Joséphine Mainvielle-Fodor also recommends not opening the mouth as if one were »presenting it to the dentist«, because of the »contorsions [...] which are painful to look at, make the listener suffer and in no way add to any natural endowments«.40 A comparison with two illustrious actresses is later given in order to indicate the mouth's statuesque ideal: »Talma, Rachel, dont les accents font pleurer ou frémir tout un auditoire, ont-ils recours à un travail de bouche? L'ouvrent-ils démesurément? Non«.41 Opening the mouth wide was simply contrary to the aesthetic codes of the time.

This discussion may be profitably linked with the preoccupations of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: as violent as his torment may be, Laocoön expresses his suffering only by sighs, »not because screams reveal a weak soul, but because they defigure the face and show the disgusting aspect of it«; an open mouth alone is »in painting a stain, and in sculpture a most disagreeable hole«.42 Now, the actor's art, which Lessing situates in a gap between the visual arts (considered »visible painting«) and poetry (considered »transitory painting«), seems to share the same aesthetic principles. And it is for both aesthetic and vocal reasons that the singer must place his head and chest in a stable, frontal position, required for clarity of gesture and voice. Given that the art of gesture is a plastic art, born of movements opposed among themselves and governed by the laws of proportion and balance, Giraldoni reaffirms the classical model and suggests that the singer

39 Manuel García: *École de García. Traité complet de l'art du chant en deux parties: 1<sup>re</sup> partie, 2<sup>e</sup> édition* [Paris, Chez l'auteur, 1840]; 2<sup>e</sup> partie, 1<sup>re</sup> édition, par Manuel García, Professeur de chant du Conservatoire Royal de Musique, Paris 1847, vol. 1, p. 23: »bouche en ovale (comme les poissons)«.

40 »[...] présentait au dentiste pour en extraire une molaire. De semblables contorsions sont pénibles à voir, font souffrir l'auditeur et sont de loin d'ajouter aux facultés naturelles«. Joséphine Mainvielle-Fodor: *Réflexions et conseils sur l'art du chant*, Paris 1857, p. 8.

41 »Talma, Rachel, whose intonations make an entire audience sob or tremble, do they need to use such movements of the mouth? Do they open it excessively? No.« Mainvielle-Fodor: *Réflexions*, p. 10.

42 »[...] non que les cris décèlent une âme faible, mais parce qu'ils défigurent le visage et en rendent l'aspect dégoûtant«; »dans la peinture une tâche, et dans la sculpture un creux de l'effet le plus désagréable«. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: *Laokoon, oder über die Grenzen der Malerey und der Poesie ... mit beyläufigen Erläuterungen verschiedener Punkte der alten Kunstgeschichte*, Berlin 1766; *Du Laocoon, ou des limites respectives de la poésie et de la peinture*, French translation by Charles Vanderbourg, Paris 1802, p. 18–19; Italian translation by C. G. Londonio under the title: *Del Laocoonte o sia Dei limiti della pittura e della poesia*, Discorso di G. E. Lessing recato dal tedesco in italiano dal cavaliere C. G. Londonio, Milano 1833. Vanderbourg's French translation of Lessing quoted here, along with Londonio's Italian version, is the one to which actors and spectators of the Théâtre Italien were most likely to have had access.



FIGURE 1 Achille Devéria: M<sup>elles</sup> Judith et Julie Grisi. Dans les rôles de Roméo et de Juliette. I Capuleti ed [sic] i Montecchi, in: *L'Artiste* (10 January 1833)



FIGURE 2 Henry Valentin: Théâtre Italien. I Capuletti [sic], Madame Angri and Madame Persiani in the roles of Romeo and Giulietta, Act IV, last scene, in: *L'Illustration* (10 November 1849), p. 163

observe how the position of the arms contrasts with that of the head »in all Greek statues, which are still today the synthesis of plastic beauty.«<sup>43</sup>

Costumes can accentuate the chest and arms with skirts and voluminous sleeves, or alternatively may be cut more loosely in order to render more free and supple such gestural dynamics. These variations are demonstrated in two images (Figure 1 and 2) which illustrate the final scene of Bellini's *Capuleti*.<sup>44</sup>

Believing his beloved to be dead, Romeo has swallowed the poison which will cost him his life, and Giulietta, now awake, descends with her beloved into despair. The first image dates from the Parisian staging of 1833, the second from the reprise of 1849. Though

43 »[...] in tutte le statue greche, che sono al giorno d'oggi ancora la sintesi del bello plastico«. Giraltoni: Guida teorico-pratica, p. 64.

44 Achille Devéria: M<sup>elles</sup> Judith et Julie Grisi. Dans les rôles de Roméo et de Juliette. I Capuleti ed [sic] i Montecchi, Delaunois lithograph, 14 × 17 cm (f.), extract from *L'Artiste*, [10<sup>th</sup> of January 1833], BnF, BMO, Est. Scènes I Capuletti (2); BnF, ASP, 4-1CO THE-2779. Henri Valentin: Théâtre Italien. I Capuletti [sic], acte IV, scène dernière. Roméo, madame Angri; Giulietta, madame Persiani, woodcut, 17 × 24,6 cm (im.), extract from *L'Illustration* [10<sup>th</sup> of November 1849], p. 163, BnF, BMO, Est. Scènes I Capuletti; BnF, ASP, 4-1CO THE-1944.



**FIGURE 3** John Hayter: *Io!*, Act I, Scene 5. Lithographs C. Hullmandel, undated. Private Collection Sergio Ragni, Naples



**FIGURE 4** John Hayter: *Miseri Pargoletti*, Act II. Left: Scene 9. Right: Scene 12. Lithographs C. Hullmandel, undated. Private Collection Sergio Ragni, Naples

they are very different images, neither is »realistic«. The first is expressive: the gesture indicates and idealises the situation and the inner state of the characters. The second is expressionistic: the gesture is emphatic, »surrealistic« in the sense used by Peter Brooks, it dramatises and seeks to express everything.<sup>45</sup> Is it the actor's art which has changed, or rather the gaze which is fixed upon him? Is it both? Whatever the case may be, the appropriate conventions we have summarised are all respected, especially the frontal position, »erect, steady on one's feet«, as Morrocchesi puts it.<sup>46</sup>

These images also illustrate the effect particular hairstyles may have: smooth, separated by a part in the first image, Giulietta's fringe opens like a theatrical curtain upon the face; in the second, her hair furls dynamically out to accompany her movement. Elsewhere, hair can have an even stronger symbolic value. In Hayez's paintings for example, *Accusa segreta* (1847–1848), *Meditazione* (1850), *Un pensiero malinconico* (1842), loose or undone hair indicates extreme commotion and emotional agitation. In the series of lithographs by John Hayter, which we may compare with Clayton Creathorne's account, *Medea* (played by Pasta) has hair which, as much as the change of the costume from white to black, symbolises her loss of power and reason (Figure 3 and 4).<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Peter Brooks: *The melodramatic imagination. Balzac, Henry James, melodrama, and the mode of excess*, New Haven/London [1976] 1995, p. 9; see also p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> »[...] mantenere una positura diritta, ben consolidata sui piedi«. Morrocchesi: *Lezioni di declamazione*, p. 302.

<sup>47</sup> Ellen Clayton Creathorne: *Queens of song*, 2 vol., London 1863, vol. 2, p. 11–12. John Hayter: Act I Scene V *Io!*, Act 2<sup>nd</sup> Scene IX. *Miseri Pargoletti*, and Act 2<sup>nd</sup> Scene 12. Lithograph C. Hullmandel, undated, Private Collection Sergio Ragni, Naples, inv. 00467b/c.

A defeat no longer of reason, in the eyes of Blaze de Bury, but a defeat pure and simple, as the hair falls down loose at the moment of Desdemona's supreme sacrifice:

»Rappellerai-je [...] ce grand secret qu'elle possédait de se draper magnifiquement à deux reprises sur sa couche, une fois pour le sommeil, l'autre pour la mort, tantôt la tête appuyée sur son bras, de manière à laisser voir au public sa main, qu'elle avait très belle, tandis que l'autre bras descendait mollement sur sa hanche; tantôt échevelée, la tête et les bras pendant hors du lit, où reposait le reste de son corps?»<sup>48</sup>

Here, it is above all the gesture of la Pasta's hand, which drapes the dress and then surrenders, which condenses Desdemona's character into a full and meaningful picture: one of innocence and supreme modesty until death.

The gesture thus captures in one instant the significance of the character's destiny. Hand gestures are of such importance for actors, and more widely for orators, that they have been the object of long treatises of »chironomy« since antiquity. The *Scoperta della chironomia*, for example, was dedicated by its author Vincenzo Requeno to his contemporary actors in 1797.<sup>49</sup> Hand gestures are judged to be so clear, so precise, that Requeno considers systematising them into a coded language. Without going quite so far, Johann Jacob Engel, in his famous treatise *Ideen zu einer Mimik* of 1785–1786, translated into French in 1802 and into Italian in 1818, considered hand gestures – for example, lifting the fingers or spreading the hand out wide – to be the most meaningful.<sup>50</sup>

Engel's notion of gesture is different from that of Lessing, in that gesture for Engel is both painting and music, meaning that the distinction between spatial and temporal arts no longer applies. Apprehending an actor's gesture not only as an empirical fact but as a sign, Engel gives such gestures a theoretical value which is at the basis of his theatrical »semiotics«. In order for gestures not to lose their full poignancy, Engel recommends using them only in rare circumstances, to express the strongest emotions or deepest thoughts.<sup>51</sup>

48 »I remember [...] this great secret she had of draping herself magnificently twice on her bed, once for sleep, a second time for death, sometimes with her head resting on her arm so as to let the public see her beautiful hand, while the other arm hung down limply on her hip; sometimes with disheveled hair, her head and arms hanging down out of the bed in which the rest of her body lay.« Henri Blaze de Bury: *Musiciens contemporains*, Paris 1856, p. 255.

49 Vincenzo Requeno: *Scoperta della chironomia ossia Dell'arte di gestire con le mani dell'abate Vincenzo Requeno* Acc. Clem., Parma 1797.

50 Johann Jacob Engel: *Ideen zu einer Mimik*, Berlin 1785/86, Italian translation by Giovanni Rasori: *Lettere intorno alla mimica di G. G. Engel. Versione dal tedesco. Aggiuntovi i capitoli sei sull'arte rappresentativa* di L. Riccoboni, Milano 1818, 2 vol.

51 Cf. Corinne Coulombeau: *Langue et langage du geste: la sémiotique théâtrale comme sémiotique comparée dans la Mimik de Johann Jakob Engel (1785)*, in: *Methodos. Savoirs et textes*, n°6, 2006, online: <http://methodos.revues.org/562>, consulted the 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2011.

It was precisely this strategy of gestural economy which met with such success in both the *Théâtre Italien* and the *Académie royale*. In *Moïse et Pharaon*, it is the moment when Moïse stretches out his hand and invokes God, that special effects were used to extend and extrapolate his words and gesture. Thus, in the staging notebook belonging to Paliani, stage manager at the *Académie*, we find the following indications: »Aux mots: Immortel courroux, Moïse remonte un peu la scène; il étend la main vers la colonne. – La foudre part du côté Cour et vient brûler la colonne, qui se brise. Le ciel s’obscurcit, la terre tremble.«<sup>52</sup> If they were not a simple prelude to an impressive technical display, special effects could transform word and gesture such as these into performative acts. Whatever the case may be, the hand concentrates here, in one unique gesture, the prophet’s authority and power, and the full meaning of the character’s ethos and destiny.

In the hierarchy of gestures, the upper and lower extremities of the body occupy then a very different rung. As we have seen, the feet are used above all to assure the stability of the pose. Under the influence of dance and pantomime, however, the bottom of the body finds itself more highly valued in the nineteenth century. Costume can contribute to this: in *Clari*, Halévy’s opera inspired by a ballet, Maria Malibran wore a shortened dress like that of a dancer, which revealed red stockings and yellow slippers. This footwear highlighted very clearly the movements of the legs and feet.<sup>53</sup> Now, dynamism truly seemed to be one of the main aspects of Malibran’s performance as *Clari*, and she was admired or blamed for this very trait. In Act III, Scene 7, for example, when *Clari*’s father has just found out about his daughter’s affair:

»Clari, le front dans la poussière, se relève et voit son père; ici, beau mouvement de physionomie; mais il disparaîtra si Clari, à genoux et qui va recevoir la malédiction de son père, glisse tout bas à l’oreille de celui-ci: »Repoussez-moi ou jetez-moi par terre«. Il faut bien que Mme Malibran ait marmotté quelque chose de semblable à son camarade Graziani, car l’effet a suivi la demande et Mme Malibran, repoussée par un bras vigoureux, a eu le plaisir de mesurer la scène.«<sup>54</sup>

52 »At the words: Immortal wrath, Moïse moves upstage a little, and he stretches out his hand towards the column. – Lightning shoots from the side of the Court and burns the column, which breaks. The sky darkens, the earth shakes.« Printed staging manual: *Collection de mises en scène de grands opéras et d’opéras-comiques représentés pour la première fois à Paris, rédigées et publiées par M. L. Paliani*, Paris undated, BnF, BMO, c. pièce 573 (II) 9<sup>e</sup> ex., p. 4.

53 See Louis Maleuvre: [*Clary, opéra italien d’Halévy et Giannone: costume de Mme Malibran-Garcia (rôle de Clary)*], coloured etching, 29,5 × 21 cm, Paris, Martinet, 1828, BnF, BMO C-261 (7-639), online: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b70014455.r=clary.langFR>, consulted the 12<sup>th</sup> of August 2011.

54 »Clari, her face in the dust, gets to her feet and sees her father; here, beautiful facial movement; but it disappears when Clari, kneeling and about to bear witness to her father’s wrath, whispers very softly into the latter’s ear: »Push me back or throw me to the ground«. Mme Malibran must have mumbled something like this to her camarade Graziani, as the desired effect followed the question, and Mme Malibran, pushed back by a vigorous arm, had the pleasure of measuring out the width of the stage.« *Le Corsaire*, 11<sup>th</sup> of December 1828.

Even though we may doubt the veracity of a newspaper generally maleficent towards the *Théâtre Italien*, – we need only think of Berlioz's first article which appeared in precisely this review on the 12<sup>th</sup> of August 1823<sup>55</sup> – all happened here as if the actress had a sudden inspiration, emphasising a traditionally neglected part of the body (the legs), and making use of unusual parts of the stage (upstage and the stage floor itself).<sup>56</sup> More generally, Malibran did not have a reputation for immobility: one anecdotal image of her in particular, passed down to posterity, has it that one night in New York in 1826, in the final scene of *Otello*, instead of allowing herself to be assassinated, Desdemona suddenly fled wildly from her husband. If Malibran's scenic decision to flee caused so much emotion in the audience, it was firstly because the role of *Otello* was played that night by Maria Malibran's own father, Manuel García – known as a violent and strict paternal figure – and secondly because such radical gestural interpretation fundamentally renewed the character, transforming Desdemona from a »twenty year-old woman« (as in Giuditta Pasta's interpretation) into, as Legouvé explains, »a young frightened fawn« of sixteen.<sup>57</sup> Even more radically, Malibran's gesture associated fear with impulse, with movement, and not with paralysis as in Engel or Morrocchesi's texts. The latter include several images depicting immobile figures of fear, reproducing the definitions of terror as bodily paralysis common since Le Brun's *Conférence on the passions of the soul*.<sup>58</sup>

**Gestural sequences and the aesthetic of the right gesture** These two anecdotes concerning Malibran's gestural range illustrate the power of expressive gestures not just as fixed or static attitudes but also as »movements«, as gestural sequences. These situations correspond to a key moment, a revealing instant far from any continuum governed by a modern demand for realism and psychology. Stendhal's anecdote about Giuditta Pasta is in this sense revealing:

- 55 Hector Berlioz: *Critique musicale*. I, 1823–1834, ed. by H. Robert Cohen and Yves Gérard, Paris 1997, p. 1–3.
- 56 For a detailed analysis of Maria Malibran's performance in *Clari*, see Céline Frigau Manning: »Playing With Excess. Maria Malibran as *Clari* at the *Théâtre Italien*«, in: *Art, Theatre, and Opera in Paris, 1750–1850*, ed. by Sarah Hibberd and Richard Wrigley, Farnham 2014, p. 203–221.
- 57 Ernest Legouvé: *Maria Malibran*, Paris 1880 (*Études et souvenirs de théâtre. Les initiateurs*), p. 12: »femme de vingt ans«; p. 13: »jeune faon épouvanté«.
- 58 See for example Morrocchesi: *Lezioni di declamazione*, plates 3, 9, 10, 33, 34. Charles Le Brun: *Conférence de M. Le Brun, sur l'expression générale et particulière*, Amsterdam: J.-L. de Lorme, Paris 1698, modern edition: *L'expression des passions et autres conférences. Correspondance*, Paris 1994, p. 47–109. See Philippe Dubois: *Chapitre 3. Glacé d'effroi. Les figures de la peur, ou les passions de l'expression à la représentation*, in: *Rhétoriques du corps*, ed. by Philippe Dubois and Yves Winkin, Bruxelles 1988, p. 39–57.



»A Trieste, un pauvre enfant de trois ans qui s'approche d'elle, et qui demandait l'aumône pour sa mère aveugle, la fait fondre en larmes sur le port où elle se promenait avec quelques amis; elle lui donne tout ce qu'elle avait. [...] Quand elle a essuyé ses larmes: »[...] Cet enfant m'a demandé l'aumône d'une manière sublime. J'ai vu en un clin d'œil, tous les malheurs de sa mère, la misère de leur maison, le manque de vêtements, le froid qu'ils souffrent bien des fois. Je serais une grande actrice si, dans l'occasion, je pouvais trouver un geste exprimant le profond malheur avec cette vérité.«<sup>59</sup>

By romanticising an episode which may in fact be entirely fabricated, this testimony no doubt contributes even more to Pasta's mythic status. It reveals, however, the corollary of expressiveness: the artist must be an expert in the passions, capable of choosing, among the myriad observed gestures of the real, the most appropriate, the most striking to the viewer's imagination. To the extent that expressive gesture does not aim to bridge the gap between words and gesture, but rather to surprise and provoke at the risk of not being understood, it distinguishes itself profoundly from dramaturgical gesture.

In *La représentation d'opéra*, Isabelle Moindrot makes a distinction between expressive and dramaturgical gesture. According to Moindrot, expressive gesture simply repeats the text. Vocal performance is here considered the singer's priority, and directly determines the ensemble of his or her gestural performance, through the physical action of breathing and the emission of the voice; the singer will thus, perhaps inevitably, tend to »translate into gesture musical expressivity, to »gesturalize« music«. <sup>60</sup> In opera, gesture would thus be destined to poverty of meaning and heteronomy, as Isabelle Moindrot defines the expressive gesture as an unproductive equivalence between the stage and the text. Now, in Moindrot's view, redundancy is not an accumulation of signs, but »above all an absence, a lack of signification«. Because expressive gesture serves »more in the recognition of situations than in their intellection«, it is here laden with negative connotations. In contrast, the dramaturgical gesture aims for interpretation instead of mere comprehension. <sup>61</sup>

In the nineteenth century, however, the connection between gesture, text and song was not seen as being redundant; on the contrary, it was perceived as the key to all theatrical effect. In fact, the expressive gesture is based on an act of intellection in all senses of the term: an act of intellectual presentation from the artist, and an act of

59 »In Trieste, a poor child of three years who approaches her asking for alms for his blind mother, makes her burst into tears on the quay where she was walking with some friends; she gives him all that she had. [...] When she had wiped her tears away she gave the following account: »[...] The child asked me for alms in a sublime way. I saw in a flash all the misfortunes of his mother, the misery of their home, their lack of clothing, the cold they suffer from many times. I would be a great actress if, at the right moments, I could find a gesture expressing deep unhappiness with a similar truth.« Stendhal: *Vie de Rossini*, Paris 1823, vol. 2, p. 492.

60 Isabelle Moindrot: *La représentation d'opéra. Poétique et dramaturgie*, Paris 1993, p. 165.

61 Ibid.

intellectual engagement on behalf of the spectator in the interpretation of shared codes, tropes and conventions (such as the believable, the natural, ideal beauty). With this aesthetic of the right gesture, the singing actor had to be careful not to multiply his gestural range. Maria Malibran herself seems to have learnt from an accident which immobilised her arm for some time: »I now see that I was doing too many gestures«, she is reported to have said.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, critics at the time never ceased to advocate restraint and plea for parsimony concerning such gestural profusion. They deplored all excess which, for them, blurred both the beauty and clarity of the scenes.

As a counter-model, the image of the singer-automaton also strengthens this aesthetic of the »geste juste«, that is to say carefully dosed. Engel blamed Riccoboni for his advice to actors, which the former deemed good only for puppeteers: for example, in order to accomplish the simple gesture of raising the hand, one must distance the upper part of the arm from the body, pull the lower part upwards by setting it slowly in motion, raise the hand while keeping it against the body until the arm reaches shoulder height, then drop it back down.<sup>63</sup> The figure of the automaton recurs again and again in the writings of these contemporary critics, and Tamburini, in the *Cenerentola* at the *Théâtre Italien*, is not the only one to pay the price when his arm is compared to the »pendulum of a ticking clock«.<sup>64</sup>

This image of the singer as automaton or machine echoes Denis Diderot and Heinrich von Kleist's philosophical reflections on the actor's craft. For Diderot, the actor as »marvelous puppet« expresses the ideal of self-control over empathetic sensibility; for Kleist, it glorifies the marionette's mechanical perfection, which remains unobtainable for human artists. In spectators' and journalists' accounts in the first half of the nineteenth century, however, this image crucially takes on a pejorative dimension: in depicting a »soulless« singer as an »automaton«, a »singing tube« or a »steam engine«, the image reflects, in a Benjaminian fashion, audiences' reactions towards the dawn of art's mechanical reproductivity.<sup>65</sup> It is thus forged to contrast with the positive model of the actor's sensitive soul.

62 Martial Teneo: *La Malibran d'après des documents inédits*, Paris/Chartres 1906, p. 61: »Mon ami, je vois à présent que je faisais trop de gestes«.

63 Engel: *Lettere intorno alla mimica*, p. 53.

64 *Courier des théâtres*, 21<sup>st</sup> of October 1832, p. 4.

65 Cf. Denis Diderot: *Paradoxe sur le comédien* [1830], Paris 1981, p. 161; Heinrich von Kleist: *Über das Marionettentheater*, Berlin 1810; Walter Benjamin: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* [1939], in: *Schriften*, ed. by Theodor W. Adorno, Frankfurt a. M. 1955, vol. 1, p. 366–405, English edition: *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, and other writings on media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings et al., translated by Edmund Jephcott et al., Cambridge Mass. 2008. For a more detailed analysis, see my article: *Singer-Machines. Describing Italian Singers (1800–1850)*, in: *Opera Quarterly* 28 (2012), no. 3–4, p. 230–258.

Deprived not only of sense and sensibility, the marionnette is the mechanical being whose gestures are not fluidly linked but rather jerky and spasmodic. The art of the singing actor does not consist of course in finding one correct gesture for each moment or thought, but rather in composing gestural sequences which accumulate in *crescendi* leading to the final pose. Contrary to what the static images of prints and etchings may lead us to believe, it is not isolated gestures that acquire the greatest strength and resonance, but rather gestures linked to other gestures in the contexts of key dramatic and dramaturgical situations. We have already seen several examples of this, in John Hayter's lithographs for *Medea* for example, or in the finale of *Otello*. If we are to believe the manuals and testimonies from spectators of the time, the syntax of these gestural sequences is organised in a precise way, preferably along oblique and circular axes. This is reflected in the excerpt from *La Pasta nell'Otello* quoted previously, where coordinating conjunctions and adverbs of time («prima», «ad un tratto», «indi», «poi») punctuate the succession of poses. These sequences are reminiscent of the attitudes that the English actrice Emma Hart, better known as Lady Hamilton, performed in amateur salon shows and recreated on stage by professionals.<sup>66</sup> Although interpreted differently by different artists, these gestural sequences were set pieces, both vocally and theatrically.

What happens then outside of these key scenes? The singer does not act from the beginning of the play to the end: rather, acting becomes like the shading in «chiaroscuro» painting where scenes which are not acted at all are valued and «mis en relief» by their contrast with key acted scenes. The spectators' attention is concentrated on these sequences, and spectators' accounts and newspaper articles consistently return to them, as if aware of their symbolic value.

This is also the reason why actors' gestures were not lost in the theatre's intricate décor. Indeed, romantic décors, like those by Domenico Ferri, decorator of the *Théâtre Italien* from 1828 to 1851, were usually imposing.<sup>67</sup> If we imagine in such décors the beautiful gesture of Desdemona dying as recounted by Blaze de Bury, we may fear that, in spite of the singers placing themselves on the forestage and Ferri's decision to remove

<sup>66</sup> First presented in Naples in the late 1780s, Hamilton's attitudes were inspired by poses from classical painting and statuary, with particular use made of shawls. Cf. Kirsten Gram Holmstrom: *Monodrama. Attitudes. Tableaux vivants. Studies on some Trends of Theatrical Fashion, 1770–1815*, Stockholm 1967.

<sup>67</sup> See Céline Frigau: *Un Bolonais à Paris. Domenico Ferri peintre-décorateur du Théâtre Italien*, in: *Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft*, vol. 28/29, 2010, p. 115–149. The majority of reproductions of Ferri's décors are conserved at the Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra, see for example BnF, BMO, Est. Scènes Anna Bolena (2), Est. Scènes Le Fantôme (1–2), Est. Scènes Ines de Castro (3–5), Est. Scènes Malek-Adel (1–3), Est. Scènes Marino Faliero (3–7), Est. Scènes Norma (1–2), Est. Scènes Otello (2), Est. Scènes Les Puritains (5), Est. Scènes La Sonnambula (1).

the two wings, such gestures would be overwhelmed or obscured.<sup>68</sup> But it is precisely the gesture's repetition, night after night, along with everything that the spectators say about it, which fixes it in their minds, their gaze and their memories – even when such gestures remain unaccompanied by song.

The actor's performance thus evokes the codes of pantomime, as in the interpretation of Assur in Rossini's *Semiramide* offered by Filippo Galli, active at the *Italiens* between 1821 and 1828. In the vision scene in Act II, Galli revealed all his talent as an actor, and deserved Ritorni's comparison of him to the dancer Costa. Costa or Demarini would not, Ritorni states, have performed a pantomime by Gioja or Viganò with less talent:

«così ben mostrava veder l'ombra, e rifuggirne spaventato, e sentirsi da essa strascinato pe' fianchi a ritroso, cadendo finalmente supplice a' piedi di lei. Eppur quel Galli, dopo essersi veramente stancato in tanta prova, allorché veniva alla stretta dell'aria, emetteva voce, che faceva rimbombare l'ampia volta del teatro della Scala.»<sup>69</sup>

Here, the effectiveness of the scene is not only due to the gestural sequence performed as a pantomime, but also to the way the actor emphasises this sequence by dynamically using the whole area of the stage.

Galli thus rethinks the entire relationship of the body with scenic space. He did not remain downstage, as his fellow actors usually did, in order to be clearly seen by the audience and prompter. Unlike Lablache in the same role and in the same scene, Galli did not point his finger at the central »loge« of the theatre as if he saw the shade of Nino, thus staying in a frontal position and amply projecting his voice. Instead, he chose to play with the different levels of the stage, and to exploit the distant upstage area. His use of scenic space thus constitutes a fundamental dramatic choice. Such distance did not hinder the audience's appreciation of his pantomime gestures, but rather softened what may have seemed exaggerated if seen under the harsh glow of the frontal spotlight. Galli thus played with the audience's imagination more than its perception; the effect was all the more successful as it did no harm in the end to the emission of his voice.

68 See *Le Temps*, 20<sup>th</sup> of October 1829. This is precisely the gesture we find in Alessandro Sanquirico's décor for *Otello* in 1823, cf. Mercedes Viale Ferrero: *La scenografia della Scala nell'età neoclassica*, Milano 1983, plate XL.

69 »[...] we saw Galli see the shade, and run from it horrified, and then, feeling himself trapped and pulled back by it, he fell to his knees before her. Then Galli, when he came to the *stretta* of his aria, and although this movement must have exhausted him, emitted a voice which made the whole vast vault of the theatre tremble.« Carlo Ritorni: *Annali del teatro della città di Reggio*. Anno 1831, Bologna 1831, p. 122, quoted by Cesare Questa: *Semiramide redenta. Archetipi, fonti classiche, censure antropologiche nel melodramma*, Urbino 1989, p. 305–306.

**A dramaturgy of the *primi attori*** Such attention devoted to the first actors guarantees that their gestures will be visible to all. The examples I have considered here are meaningful in this respect, since they concern only singers of exceptional fame and talent. Hierarchy of gesture and hierarchy of singers form a dramaturgy in which the second actors' and the choirs' only function is to put the first actors in the spotlight (here again, according to a logic of *chiaroscuro*). The organisation of the stage reflects this hierarchy, with first actors on the forestage or clearly framed by the rest of the performers.

Whether used as groups or, more rarely, individually, the choristers and extras only serve to highlight the acting of the »grande attore«. In the finale of Act II of *Otello*, when Desdemona, who was unable to prevent the duel between Otello and Rodrigo, trembles with fear while waiting to know the outcome, Maria Malibran suddenly made an extra intervene in the action, as reported by Ernest Legouvé:

»N'alla-t-elle pas un jour prendre dans le groupe des figurants un pauvre diable de comparse qu'elle n'avait pas prévu, ne l'amena-t-elle pas sur le devant de la scène, et là, ne lui demanda-t-elle pas des nouvelles du combat, avec un élan de désespoir et une passion qui couraient grand risque d'exciter l'hilarité de la salle? [...] Le figurant fut frappé d'une telle stupeur que sa stupeur le rendait immobile, et que son immobilité lui servit de contenance!«<sup>70</sup>

The »prima donna«, queen of the stage and conscious of being so, deliberately chose an extra of the lowest rung. She thus took a calculated risk: she knew that the greater the extra's panic, the more intense would be the effect. She thus short-circuited the stereotypical pose, expression and attitude that an extra, warned in advance of such an event, would almost certainly have had, and instead engendered a sincere reaction, which in its naïve truth contrasted and yet also perfectly cohered with the studied spontaneity of Malibran's performance. Here, Malibran's radical scenic diversion is less valuable for the active participation of the choir than for the distance it theatrically establishes between Malibran's mastered control and the extra's honest confusion.

Secondary actors suffered the same fate. In *Otello*, such important characters as Elmiro and Otello were confined to a supporting function. As Luigi Morando de' Rizzoni recounts, the scene of Rodrigo's aria serves less to showcase the voice than to attract the attention of Desdemona, who stares at him intently: »allorchè Rodrigo le parla d'amore,

70 »And did she not one day go into the group of extras to take a poor devil, who she had not warned beforehand, and did she not bring him to the front of the stage, and there, did she not ask for news of the battle, with a burst of despair and passion that ran the great risk of exciting hilarity in the audience? [...] The extra was struck with such amazement that his stupor made him immobile, and his immobility thankfully portrayed him in a good light.« Legouvé: *Maria Malibran*, p. 14.

ed ella lo fissa con occhio di disprezzo.«<sup>71</sup> Similarly, although the malediction scene is one of the key moments for the role of Desdemona's father Elmiro, and indeed of the whole opera, the basso Cesare Badiali was only given a modest place. Only two threatening lines and two adjectives indicating staging – »severe« and »threatening« – were given to him, while the detailed gestures of the actress were described at great length:

»Allorchè il padre per obbligare la figlia a farsi sposa a Rodrigo le dice: *Se al padre non cedi / Punirti saprà./* si arresta come per sorpresa, e ripiega indietro il busto, che mal si regge sulle gambe che stanno quasi genuflesse, indi a poco, colle mani chiederti perdono, forma un dolce semicerchio della metà superiore del corpo, e move in linea spirale il collo, e la testa verso il volto del padre, e cerca di scoprire la sua mente, e scorgendolo severo, e minaccioso cade nella più grande tristezza.«<sup>72</sup>

The effect produced by Elmiro's paternal intimidation depends very little, we realise, on the basso's acting, but rather rests entirely on the reaction such threats create in the young woman. To embody this reaction with appropriate intensity, the actress strings together a series of gestural movements which are at once both linked and distinct. The gestures follow each other, as indicated by the temporal markers, and obey the rules of logic (the surprise that first paralyses her, the movement of retreat, the half-finished gesture of begging, and finally the melancholy of defeat) and could each be captured, »photographed« in an image which obeyed the norms of composition, proportion and balance. The backing away seems caused by the bowing of the legs and bending the torso backwards; the torso then becomes erect in order to form, with the arms, »a soft half-circle«, while the neck is stretched »in a spiral line«. The artist does not need to hide her artifice (»as if by surprise«). She makes of her own body the site of representation, knowing that it is her body to which all eyes are drawn, rather than that of her interlocutor.

We find the same situation at the *Théâtre Italien*: though interpreted by the famous Luigi Lablache, Elmiro was of no greater importance here than in the previous production. When Blaze de Bury thus begins his description, »the father storms in, and we were then witness to one of the most wonderful heights to which dramatic art has ever been raised«, we expect to read details about the basso's performance. This is not, however, what we are given: Blaze de Bury is rather fascinated by the same effect of bodily paralysis as that described by Morando de' Rizzoni: »À l'aspect du vieillard qui vient de la maudire,

71 »[...] when Rodrigue talks to her of love, and she stares at him with a look full of contempt.« De Rizzoni: *La Pasta nell'Otello*, p. 14.

72 »When the father, to force his daughter to marry Rodrigo, says to her: *Se al padre non cedi / Punirti saprà*, she freezes as if by surprise, and bends her torso back, barely supported on her almost kneeling legs, then shortly after, she asks forgiveness with her hands, forms a soft half-circle with the top half of her body, and moves her neck in spiral motions, and her head turned towards her father's face, seeks to unravel his thoughts, and seeing him severe and threatening, falls into the deepest sorrow.« *Ibid.*, p. 13–14.

Desdémone s'arrêtait immobile et comme frappée de la foudre au milieu de ses élans d'ivresse.»<sup>73</sup>

**Conclusion** At the beginning of his *Réflexions sur Lekain et sur l'art théâtral*, the great French actor François-Joseph Talma expresses one of the most commonly shared regrets in the history of the theatre: »when he has left the stage, the actor's talent exists only in the memory of those who saw and heard him.«<sup>74</sup> No doubt singers of these times left little more trace of their gestures than of their voice. But, as this article hopes to have shown, there are many spectators, with many memories and testimonies, and many textual or graphic sources which we can correlate with these accounts in order to glimpse what might have happened on stage at the *Théâtre Italien*.

We thus understand that if the *Théâtre Italien* sometimes sailed »en haute mer«, having no stage director, or »captain sailing a ship«, it was not because nobody cared about the staging of its productions, but rather because various members of the theatre did so, and because the first singers wanted their hands firmly on the ship's wheel. From the librettist to the singing master or even the ballet master, many people were active in stage organisation depending on their skills, abilities and desires. But their action has to be understood in terms of logistics and disciplinary organisation: the artistic part of staging depended primarily on the »primi attori«.

As these examples have illustrated, many of those engaged at the *Théâtre Italien* were well-known for their talent as actors. They developed scenic practices responding to a commonly diffused hierarchy of gestures, coordinated in the search for an aesthetic of the »right« gesture. Far from being mere attitudes, their gestures had to be conceived as sequences culminating in a revealing or epiphanic instant. The success of such a gesture relies on the actor's being able to make us understand an already known »ethos«, on the sensibility of the spectator to recognise the gesture in question, and on the agreement which binds actor and spectator together around the aesthetic codes common to the arts and culture of the time. But in the first half of the nineteenth century, the art of the actor transcended traditional models of figurative art, renewing conventional hierarchies through observation of the quotidian and by such scenic practices as pantomime and attitudes. At the same time, the specificity of the singer's gesture, in its union with singing, asserted itself more and more. The ideal of the actor-singer was based less on principles

73 »At the sight of the old man who has just cursed her, Desdemona stopped immobile, as if struck by lightning, in the middle of her exalted movements.« Blaze de Bury: *Musiciens contemporains*, p. 254.

74 François-Joseph Talma: *Quelques réflexions sur Lekain et sur l'art théâtral dans les Mémoires de Lekain*, Paris 1825, modern edition: *Réflexions sur Lekain et sur l'art théâtral*, ed. by Pierre Frantz, Paris 2002, p. 27.

to be adopted than on a pantheon of model artists, who often originated in the Paris *Théâtre Italien*. It is for this reason that we may attempt to understand staging and acting practices, in the absence of a stage director, not by neglecting or disregarding singers' personal styles and spectators' subjective visions, but rather by putting these dynamic aspects on centre stage, in the spotlight.



## Inhalt

- Florian Reichert und Edith Keller** Einleitung 7
- Laura Moeckli** »Nobles dans leurs attitudes, naturels dans leurs gestes«.  
Singers as Actors on the Paris Grand Opéra Stage 11
- Anette Schaffer** Der beredte Leib. Das Bild und die französische  
Schauspielpraxis des 19. Jahrhunderts 41
- Edith Keller, Stefan Saborowski und Florian Reichert** Gesten auf dem Prüfstand.  
Ein Werkstattbericht 74
- Céline Frigau Manning** Staging and Acting Without a Director.  
Expressive Gestures at the Paris Théâtre Royal Italien 87
- Anselm Gerhard** Zugespitzte Situationen. Gestische Verständlichkeit und  
»parola scenica« in der französischen und italienischen Oper nach 1820 111
- Christine Pollerus** »Zeichen der innern Empfindung«.  
Zur Gestik in der Wiener Oper 1800–1850 124
- Sigrid T’Hooft** in an interview with **Laura Moeckli** Using Historical  
Treatises and Iconography in Opera Staging Today 142
- Stephanie Schroedter** Städtische Bewegungsräume auf der Bühne.  
Giacomo Meyerbeers Grands opéras im Kontext urbaner Tanzkulturen 151
- Namen-, Werk- und Ortsregister** 186
- Die Autorinnen und Autoren der Beiträge** 191

## SÄNGER ALS SCHAUSPIELER

Zur Opernpraxis des 19. Jahrhunderts in Text, Bild und  
Musik • Herausgegeben von Anette Schaffer, Edith Keller,  
Laura Moeckli, Florian Reichert und Stefan Saborowski

MUSIKFORSCHUNG DER  
HOCHSCHULE DER KÜNSTE BERN  
Herausgegeben von Martin Skamletz

Band 5



Dieses Buch ist im November 2014 in erster Auflage in der Edition Argus in Schliengen/Markgräflerland erschienen. Gestaltet und gesetzt wurde es im Verlag aus der *Seria* und der *SeriaSans*, die von Martin Majoor im Jahre 2000 gezeichnet wurden. Gedruckt wurde es von der Firma Bookstation im bayerischen Anzing auf Alster, einem holzfreien, säurefreien und alterungsbeständigen Werkdruckpapier der Firma Geese in Hamburg. Ebenfalls aus Hamburg, von Igepa, stammt das Vorsatzpapier *Caribic cherry*. *Rives Tradition*, ein Recyclingpapier mit leichter Filznarbung, das für den Bezug des Umschlags verwendet wurde, stellt die Papierfabrik Arjo Wiggins in Boulogne Billancourt/Frankreich her. Das Kapitalband mit rot-schwarzer Raupe wurde von der Band- und Gurtweberei Güth & Wolf in Gütersloh gewoben. Gebunden wurde das Buch von der Buchbinderei Diegmann-Bückers in Anzing bei München. Im Internet finden Sie Informationen über das gesamte Verlagsprogramm unter [www.editionargus.de](http://www.editionargus.de). Zum Forschungsschwerpunkt »Interpretation« der Hochschule der Künste Bern finden Sie Informationen unter [www.hkb.bfh.ch/interpretation](http://www.hkb.bfh.ch/interpretation), Näheres zum Projekt »Sänger als Schauspieler« sowie zu weiteren Forschungsprojekten unter [www.hkb-interpretation.ch](http://www.hkb-interpretation.ch). Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über [www.dnb.de](http://www.dnb.de) abrufbar. © Edition Argus, Schliengen 2014. Printed in Germany ISBN 978-3-931264-85-7