

ESF Exploratory Workshop on  
**Singing Actor/Acting Singer: Performance,  
Representation and Presence on the  
Operatic Stage, 1600-2007**

Manchester (United Kingdom), 23-26 June 2008

Convened by:  
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**SCIENTIFIC REPORT**

## ***Executive summary***

As outlined in the case for support, the purpose of this Exploratory Workshop held at the University of Manchester in June 2008 was to develop a fuller understanding of the theatrical practices exhibited in the staging of opera from 1600 to the present, with specific emphasis on vocal and dramatic performance. The Workshop brought together sixteen scholars from Britain, Germany, Portugal, France, Italy and the US in order to establish common terms of reference for the project, clarify research aims and objectives, determine appropriate methodologies, identify areas of research with particular reference to locating valuable primary sources, and develop a programme of future events and funding applications.

Methodologies pertaining to both performance/performative dimensions and the aesthetic experiences of opera were considered with a view to establishing a new historiographic vision of the genre made sensitive to the ephemeral qualities of operatic spectacle. Four fundamental questions determined our approaches: how can we deal with the performance processes and aesthetic experiences of the past? With which discourses can we surround/circumscribe the process and act of performance? How do we problematise the notion of 'ideal' performance? How can we establish a historiography of operatic performance practice?

In order to explore and test the viability of these central tenets of the research project, the Workshop consisted of four seminars devoted to the consideration of four main topics:

### **Gesture and Meaning**

### **The Body, Society and Culture**

### **The Impact of the Performing Body on Composition**

### **Voice, Vocality and Interpretation**

Each seminar was led by four facilitators with particular expertise in the set topic, who each offered a ten-fifteen minute paper on an aspect of the topic before opening up the discussion to the group as a whole. Although the time-limitations for the papers inevitably seemed too short, the discursive nature of a seminar format permitted a much freer exchange of ideas and a genuine dynamic of investigation and exploration than is normally possible in a conventional conference. Participants were invited to

scrutinize the topics in the light of a series of ‘texts’, including the work of four particular singers (Farinelli, Giuditta Pasta, Fyodor Shalyapin and Maria Callas); a selection of singing and performance manuals across the period; a filmed recording of Peter Sellar’s production of Handel’s *Theodora* (Glyndebourne, 1996); and a compilation of silent footage and historical recordings entitled *The Art of Singing: Golden Voices of the Century* (1996). Some participants focussed their discussions on these ‘texts’; others considered them only tangentially, if at all, but chose to pursue related topics that served to enrich the debate.

The event provided significant space for intellectual debate on opera as performance and in performance, emphasizing perspectives that cut across disciplinary, intellectual traditions and habits of academic discourse. All participants brought to the event a strong commitment to the topic, contributing generously to the proceedings.

### ***Scientific content***

The first panel on ***Gesture and Meaning*** dealt with the significant changes in histrionic performance modes from the seventeenth century to contemporary opera performances, in terms of both the external demonstration of a role and the internal approaches of the performer, as well as the relation between theoretical treatises and actual performance practice. **Laura Naudeix** focussed on the question of the transposition of gesture from the orator (as it is defined in the art of declamation) to the practice of the singers, mainly in the repertoire of seventeenth-century French opera, with reference to texts by Blanchet, Saint-Évremond, Titon du Tillet and others. The main question concerned the link between text, music and movement: what is the singer supposed to emphasize or “translate” in kinesis? In her presentation, **Jacqueline Waeber** took as a point of departure late eighteenth-century melodrama, in which gesture (coupled with music) fully assumed its role of ‘communicator’, within views on the purported universal value of gestural language. She discussed an excerpt from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Lettre sur la musique française* (1753) in the context of contemporaneous French opera notions of *bas comique* and *haut comique*, and the *jeu muet*. **Clemens Risi** was interested in the influence of ancient rhetoric and baroque gesture practice, and also the micro-gestures inherent in vocal training, on the standard gestural patterns still visible in opera performance today, and the ways in

which these are (still) related to signification and emotion. In considering to what extent it is possible to catch a glimpse of performative processes of the past by surrounding the historical event with theories, discourses and visual representations of performance practice, he suggested a comparison between Johann Jakob Engel's treatise and nineteenth-century costume sketches as a means of understanding gesture practice. **Isabelle Moindrot** focussed on the relation between silence, movement and immobility in modern opera productions, where silent actors (or singers) are present, creating a specific "communicative system" relevant for the entire production, but also determining the theatricality of the acting of the singers themselves. The group discussion following these presentations by the facilitators focussed mainly on exploring the methodological function theoretical treatises and *didascalie* might have for notions about opera in performance; their status as pre-texts, protocols of performance aesthetics or supplements; and the potential contemporary usages of this historical knowledge (reconstruction, deconstruction, new inventions).

The second panel on *Body, Society and Culture* explored the extent to which operatic performance practice illustrates the influence of other contemporaneous cultural, social and philosophical developments. **Suzanne Aspden** examined the contrasting descriptions of Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni on the London stage in order to delineate the theoretical difficulties of constituting the singer's body in the early eighteenth century, highlighting the evident interplay between fact and fiction, and the aspect of binarism in both opera itself and cultural discourses around opera. **Arnold Jacobshagen** addressed the issue of the body as a social and cultural phenomenon in operatic performance of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by considering the question of costumes and operatic genres. By exploring costume as a 'substitution' for the body, and the manner in which it related to broader concepts of behaviour, society and culture, he discussed the tensions inherent in ideas of 'authenticity' in staging. **Alessandra Campana** circumscribed an episode in the history of operatic acting – the case of Verdi's *Otello* – with debates about the connection between body, emotion, acting and technique, from the late eighteenth century up until today. Mapping out a development from Diderot's 'paradoxe' (by way of Coquelin), Archer's 'masks and faces' to Auslander's account of the robotic performer in Shutov's installation, *Abacus*, she considered acting as a process of mediation that itself is mediatized. **Gabriela Cruz** elaborated on the dialogue between live and recorded voice in the early twentieth century and the attempts to fix

vocal temporality in more permanent form, both through audio recordings and through the means of X-ray images of the singer's instrument. Both sonic and visual prints in some measure constitute a construction of a 'remembrance' of voice that eventually replaces the live instrument: the machine becomes the "better" body.

The third panel on *The Impact of the Performing Body on Composition* emphasised the ways in which music reflected, embodied or mimicked the body, and *vice versa*, the ways in which the body reflected, embodied or mimicked music.

**Susan Rutherford** asked that if music in nineteenth-century opera was increasingly imprinted with a more explicit sense of the body, whose 'body' produced the imprint? Examining aspects of Giuseppe Verdi's compositional practice, she suggested an interconnection between various 'bodies' – of the composer, the character, the singer, and the spectator – in the context of nineteenth-century notions of thermodynamics (as relating to Michel de Certeau's idea of the 'opera of the body'). **Karen Henson** queried the relationship between bodily movement and musical gesture in *fin-de-siècle* opera, focussing on the 'sensuous haze', voyeurism and eroticizing of the singer, and exemplifying this approach with a film recording of the aria "Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix" from Camille Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*, performed by Risë Stevens. **Heather Hadlock** presented a re-reading of Giovanni Battista Mancini's singing treatise by focussing on aspects of gender and the emphasis of the treatise on masculinity. She addressed the social and ethical dimension of acting by looking at the character of Aurelio in Gaetano Donizetti's *L'assedio di Calais* as a new role model of the male hero as father, and by highlighting the apparent tension between the "manliness" of the text (as proposed by the libretto) and the "womanliness" of the voice (as evident in the performance in Naples by a female *musicista*). **Laura Tunbridge** provocatively turned to a different genre 'without bodies', lieder, in order to clarify the issue's relevance for opera. In considering a medium where gender as a product of body lacks its usual defining characteristics, where men have on occasion performed 'Frauenliebe und Leben' and women have sung 'Winterreise', she confronted the notion that all bodies in vocal music are of necessity imaginary and therefore 'unrecoverable'.

**Sarah Nancy** opened both the final panel *Voice, Vocality and Interpretation* and the horizon of our ensuing discussion by debating the relevance of historical and contemporary philosophical positions on the concept of voice (as sonorous object, as an 'empty and threatening fetish', as productive of 'jouissance', as absence or the

'lost' voice) in relationship to the operatic voice and ideas of representation and mimesis. **Roger Parker** considered how we are persuaded to 'see' voice, by analysing the effect of camera techniques, shot composition, and editing in filmed opera, and exploring ideas of 'suture' as a means of tying in the spectator to both music and image. Illustrating his discussion with an analysis of two scenes from Peter Sellars' production of Händel's *Theodora*, he demonstrated the way in which the director is the 'true creator' (rather than composer or singer) of the spectator's apprehension of vocality and interpretation in this version of the oratorio. **Marco Beghelli** presented the recently acquired archive of tenor Mario Del Monaco, now housed in Bologna, outlining the problems and possibilities in acquiring and preserving documentary evidence of performance history and its value as a means of analysis of voice, vocality and interpretation. A very specific approach to one such analysis (of a scene from Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*, performed by Mirella Freni) was proposed by **Emanuele Senici**, who stressed the importance of considering the many subjective layers of perception and the pleasures of 'historically-nuanced listening' in order to examine voice and vocality in sufficient depth as well as to widen the horizon in terms of the cultural, social and political circumstances of a performance and of its audience – us.

The Workshop concluded with an open discussion about the effectiveness of the research proposal, the ideas raised in the seminars, and possible ways forward for future development.

### ***Assessment of the results, contribution to the future direction of the field.***

The Workshop laid the intellectual and social foundations for our collaborative and international research project, in its aim to produce a history of opera as both performance and performativity that will set new historical and theoretical standards in the field. To this end, we worked in two complementary directions, developing a consensual perspective on the conceptual and historiographic frameworks of the project and probing the fragilities in the current understanding of performance in opera. In testing the tenets of the research proposal, the most fruitful areas for further exploration clustered around theories of gesture, spectacle, presence and media.

Gesture is a key notion in the intellectual constellation of the performative. It is also a notion with a dense and varied history, ranging across its place in baroque rhetoric, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century language studies, psychology and physiology, and in modernist aesthetics. Proceedings in the workshop foregrounded the richness of this history, highlighting a variety of sources and discourses that overlap a significant number of fields of human inquiry, and which condition current understandings of the theatrical both in theoretical and practical ways.

Although a fundamental element of the experience of opera, spectacle is often (particularly in English-language scholarship) an underplayed aspect in terms of academic investigation of operatic history and aesthetic praxis. The debates in the Workshop opened up further ways of contemplating historical and modern technologies, including costumes, lighting effects, makeup, and stage properties in lyric theatre. Consideration of the labour and energy spent on the performing stage, both human and mechanic, is central to a historiography of opera as performance and, it is expected, will prompt a re-evaluation of important musicological values, certainties about compositional and performative authority, the nature of opera as artwork, the privileging of the relationship between singer and composer, the ethics of lyrical expression, and the constitution of voice.

Presence, a notion often evoked in much recent writing on opera, remains an important keyword for addressing the centrality of physical actuality in operatic performance. Presence engages both practical questions regarding the praxis of opera – the interplay of aural and visual elements, vocal and histrionic practices, and the relationships between singers, composers and spectators – and those fantasies of the bodily or the vocal emerging from these contexts, themselves essential to the identity of the genre. Various case-studies delving into the historical and aesthetic dimensions of the staged voice and body particularized the notion of “presence,” offering new paths towards our understanding of the notion.

Opera has been significantly involved with technical media for over a century, and the nature of operatic perception has become increasingly technologized. Various contributions in the workshop addressed new media perspectives in opera studies, considering the aesthetic impact of sound and video recording techniques, of montage and synchronization, the aesthetics of high-fidelity, and voice in the recorded medium.

The conclusion of the Workshop thus confirmed the centrality of the ‘singing actor’ as an essential figure in exploring the ephemeral process of opera across a wide

historical and geographical range, identified new lines of inquiry to pursue, and established the need for greater methodological variety and precision. In particular, it emphasised the importance of international – particularly European – collaboration in this field as a means of facilitating this research and the exchange of ideas.

In order to develop and communicate the findings of the Workshop, the organisers intend to produce a special edition of an academic journal on methodologies for investigating performance in opera; to seek further funding for the establishment of a large-scale research network; to stage a three-day international conference; and to edit a volume of essays on historical and contemporary case-studies relating to the topic.





## PARTICIPANTS

<b>NAME</b>	<b>AFFILIATION</b>	<b>AGE STRUCTURE</b>
<b>Dr Suzanne Aspden</b>	Oxford University, UK	35-40
<b>Professor Marco Beghelli</b>	Università di Bologna, ITALY	50-55
<b>Dr Alessandra Campana</b>	Tufts University, Massachusetts, USA	35-40
<b>Dr Gabriela Gomes Da Cruz</b>	Universidade Nova de Lisboa, PORTUGAL	40-45
<b>Professor Heather Hadlock</b>	Stanford University, USA	35-40
<b>Dr Karen Henson</b>	Columbia University, New York, USA	30-35
<b>Professor Dr. Arnold Jacobshagen</b>	Musikhochschule Köln, GERMANY	35-40
<b>Professor Isabelle Moindrot</b>	Université François-Rabelais de Tours, FRANCE	45-50
<b>Dr Sarah Nancy</b>	Université de Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle, FRANCE	30-35
<b>Dr Laura Naudeix</b>	Université Catholique de l'Ouest, Angers, FRANCE	30-35
<b>Professor Roger Parker</b>	King's College, University of London, UK	55-60
<b>Juniorprofessor Dr. Clemens Risi</b>	Institut für Theaterwissenschaft, Freie Universität Berlin, GERMANY	35-40
<b>Dr Susan Rutherford</b>	University of Manchester, UK	50-55
<b>Dr Emanuele Senici</b>	Università La Sapienza, Rome	40-45
<b>Dr Laura Tunbridge</b>	University of Manchester, UK	30-35
<b>Dr Jacqueline Waeber</b>	Duke University, USA	35-40

### GENDER REPARTITION

Female: 11  
Male: 5

### REPARTITION BY COUNTRY OF WORK

DE 2  
FR 3  
IT 2  
PT 1  
UK 4  
US 4

### REPARTITION BY NATIONALITY

CH 1  
DE 2  
FR 3  
IT 3  
PT 1  
UK 5  
US 1