4 Opera and Hypnosis
Victor Maurel's Experiments with Verdi's Otello

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One day in his private home on the avenue Bugeaud, in Paris's sixteenth arrondissement, the famous baritone Victor Maurel hosted a meeting which combined music with hypnotism of a young woman. This is how Maurel recounts the experience:

A very beautiful young girl was involved in M. le colonel Derochas's experiments as his subject. – M. Jules Bois, whose intellectual curiosity is always aroused, was at that time interested in everything related to hypnotism, and agreed one day to bring me Lina. – He put her to sleep and one of his friends sat at the piano, for Lina was especially sensitive to musical suggestions. A minuet was played first. Lina's robust frame did not fit well with the somewhat mawkish graces of this kind. – But, after several instants of hesitation and fumbling, as the musical intentions were repeated, the rhythm of the dance finally took hold of her and inspired within her its laws. We then saw her sketch out delicate little steps, bending over in exquisite bows; a fan that was held out to her was handled with delightful affectation. – Then, with no transition, the *Marseillaise* suddenly resounded on the piano; Lina leapt, waving her fan, which was transmuted into a sort of imaginary banner. – Her chest was pounding, her wild and exalted eyes had become disproportionately enlarged, all her beautiful tensed body, raised up by a fanatical enthusiasm, seemed the living emblem of the great days of old. Finally, forcing myself to make no gesture, I sung to her Cassio's *Dream* from Verdi's *Otello*, putting into it the best of my art, and I had the surprise, which deeply moved me, to see her use, among other excellent gestures, some of those I had used myself in this famous piece.[1]

[1] 'Il s'agissait d'une fort belle jeune fille qui servait alors de sujet aux expériences de M. le colonel Derochas. – M. Jules Bois, dont la curiosité intellectuelle toujours en éveil s'intéressait à ce moment aux choses de l'hypnotisme, voulut bien, un jour, m'amener Lina. – Il l'endormit et quelqu'un de nos amis présents se mit au piano, car Lina était spécialement sensible aux suggestions musicales. On joua d'abord un menuet. La plastique robuste de Lina s'accordait mal avec les grâces un peu mièvres de ce genre. – Mais, après quelques instants d'hésitation, de tâtonnements, au fur et à mesure que se répétaient les desseins musicaux, le rythme de la danse s'empara d'elle enfin et lui inspira ses lois. Nous la vîmes alors esquisser des pas menus et délicats, se courber en des révérences exquises; un éventail qu'on lui tendit fut manié avec une délicieuse afféterie. – Puis, sans transition, la *Marseillaise* retentit tout à coup au piano; Lina bondit, brandissant son éventail, transmué en je ne sais quel drapeau imaginaire. – Son torse haletait, ses yeux exaltés et farouches s'étaient démesurément agrandis, tout son beau corps tendu, soulevé par un fanatique enthousiasme, semblait l'emblème vivant des grands jours d'autrefois. Enfin, m'astreignant à ne faire aucun geste, je lui chantai, en y mettant le meilleur de

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In this account, which was part of one of Maurel's lectures published in 1904, the figure of the singer does not appear, as in other medical enquiries of the time, as a patient or object of study. Maurel sings, but he is not the centre of attention, which is focused instead on the hypnotised woman. Nor is he a mere spectator, as he actively participates in the experiment that he himself stages and later recounts. Such hypnotic experiments featuring music and musicians were frequent occurrences at the time; they were staple events in the social life of salons, as well as in occultist and scientific circles, and accompanied the emergence of a modern discipline: psychology.[2] Less frequent are descriptions originating from singers themselves. What matters here, however, is not merely Maurel's experience of hypnosis, nor his recollection of the anecdote, but rather the wide range of questions and hypotheses, both scientific and artistic, to which the episode gives rise.

In my analysis of Maurel's text, I will argue that musical hypnosis was not just a fashionable pretext for bourgeois scientific performances and sensational public exhibitions. Nor was it merely an alternative therapy for unexplainable or otherwise untreatable diseases. Scholars such as the anthropologist Clara Gallini and the historian Jacqueline Carroy have shown that hypnosis throughout the long nineteenth century was a powerful culture in itself, which was widely engaged with across the working, middle and upper classes.[3] It did not concern only medical contexts, but had its own actors, functions, practices and sites.

Through Maurel's lecture, I would like to explore the prominent role played by music in hypnosis at the time and to investigate how Maurel went further than usual, thereby placing opera squarely in the spotlight. Among a number of important questions raised by this episode of musical hypnosis – ranging from the authenticity or stimulation of Lina's state to the questions of ecstasy and the relationship between the male observer and the female hypnotised subject – I would like to investigate some crucial aspects of Maurel's approach. To do so, I will first reconstitute the pedagogical and research context in which Maurel recounts this hypnotic event. I will then show how Maurel's experiment was simultaneously

mon art, le *Rêve* de Cassio, tiré de l'*Otello*, de Verdi, et j'eus la surprise, qui ne fut pas sans m'émouvoir vivement, de lui voir employer, parmi d'autres excellents, quelques-uns des gestes que j'employais moi-même dans ce morceau fameux.' V. Maurel 1904, 4–5.

[2] Psychology at this time was seeking to become part of the medical sciences and the clinic, thus extricating itself as a discipline from its discursive and institutional ties to philosophy.

[3] 'Au siècle dernier, l'hypnose a été également une culture.' Carroy 1991, 19. See also Didi-Huberman 1982; Gallini, 1983; Gauld 1992; and the works of the philosopher Isabelle Stengers, especially Stengers 2002.

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representative and unique, especially in the choice of 'Era la notte' from Giuseppe Verdi's *Otello*. I propose elements of a reading of the opera through the lens of hypnosis before finally attempting to shed light on Maurel's psychological theory and method of acting, founded on the imagination and inspired by hypnosis.

Opera and Hypnosis at the École des Hautes Études Sociales

Victor Maurel not only experimented with hypnosis, he also made use of it in his reflections on his art, which he then explored in his pedagogy. He also found a prestigious and appropriate context for his teaching: the École des Hautes Études Sociales, where he presented his findings on acting and hypnosis in 1904, at 16 rue de la Sorbonne 'in the learned quarter of the Sorbonne and the Collège de France'.[4]

How could a singer find himself in such a position? The École, founded in 1900, followed in the wake of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), created in 1868 in the context of higher educational reforms. Academics and practitioners were brought together at the EPHE in order to develop new ways of teaching and conducting research. The goal was to create active citizens, in the spirit of the comparative pedagogy of the *Universités populaires*.[5] When the École des Hautes Études Sociales (EHES) opened an Art School in 1903, Maurel was invited to join the faculty, and was appointed 'Chair of Vocal and Scenic Aesthetics'. This chair aimed at 'facilitating the open presentation of questions relating to the technique of singing and acting and the overall aesthetics of the art of the modern lyric interpreter'.[6] Maurel's courses were featured not in the musical curriculum, but in that devoted to theatre. Academics, critics and even politicians taught in the curriculum's first two sections, namely 'History of Theatre' and 'Theatre Abroad', while the third section, 'New Ideas and Forms', was entrusted to six pedagogues, including two artists: André Antoine, Director of the *Théâtre libre*, and Firmin Gémier, a figure emblematic of the *théâtre populaire*. As for Maurel, he was in sole charge of

[4] 'dans le docte quartier de la Sorbonne et du Collège de France'. Bois 1903.

[5] The objective of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), later undertaken by the École des Hautes Études Sociales, was to create a 'young Sorbonne'; see Prochasson 1985.

[6] 'destinée à faciliter l'exposition libre des questions relatives à la technique du chant et de la scène et à l'esthétique générale de l'art de l'interprète lyrique moderne'. In *Le Ménestrel* (17 May 1903) and *Gil Blas* (18 May 1903).

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the fourth section, presented in detail by *Le Guide musical* as a 'course on musical, vocal and scenic aesthetics: vocal training: doctrines and their advocates; attempts made to introduce scientific notions into the study of the art of singing; what a science of singing should be: its method and means'.[7] Maurel conducted his teaching in front of a large audience of students, society ladies and various figures of the musical, artistic and academic worlds.[8] The question of hypnosis was already omnipresent in both scientific and artistic debates (some journalists suspected Sarah Bernhardt, for instance, of acting under a state of self-hypnosis);[9] but thanks to Maurel, hypnosis was placed centre stage from the very beginning of his series of lectures, which took place every Friday afternoon during the early months of 1904. The inaugural lecture, published the same year in a small volume, only underlined the multiple interests of one of the nineteenth century's most famous singers.

Creator of the roles of Iago and Falstaff, Maurel was convinced that the singer must be an actor, and a true collaborator with the composer.[10] A 'polymorphic artist', in the words of Jules Bois, Maurel worked with painting, theatre and cinema, and wrote in depth about specific roles and his art in general.[11] He was always seeking to discover more and to perfect his art: studying philosophy, with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as his bedside reading, learning about sciences, laryngoscopy or psychology, visiting hospitals or close friends such as the mathematician Manœuvrier, as well as practising gymnastics and boxing.[12] What is less well known, however, is Maurel's commitment to the potentially fruitful relationship between opera and the sciences, one which he defends in *Le Chant rénové par la*

7 'Cours d'esthétique musicale, vocale et scénique: L'enseignement vocal: les doctrines, les hommes; tentatives faites pour introduire des notions scientifiques dans l'étude de l'art du chant; ce que doit être une science du chant: la méthode et les moyens.' *Le Guide musical* 49 (1903), 561; the same article reproduces details of the entire course, along with the names of the teachers.

8 See, for instance, the description in *Gil Blas* (30 January 1904). The presence of a variety of society figures is indicated, including 'Mmes Ambroise Thomas, Camille Erlanger, Bergounhioux de Wailly, comtesse de Ghinsel, Mlles Jane Morel et Villain, M. et Mme Lombard, le prince Bibesco, MM. Gustave Bret, René Doire, André Pirro, le docteur et Mme Letulle, M. et Mme Brunswick et d'autres'.

9 See, for instance, [unsigned] 1892.

10 V. Maurel 1897, v. On Maurel as an acting singer, see Henson 2015, 19–47.

11 Bois 1903; see V. Maurel 1897, 1–148; and B. Maurel [1923?].

12 On reading Nietzsche, see Bois 1903. Published in German between 1883 and 1885, Nietzsche's text was fully translated into French for the first time by Henri Albert (Paris: Le Mercure de France, 1898). On Maurel's exposure to scientific and mathematical discourses, see *Gil Blas* (3 January 1904), which published a portrait of the mathematician Manœuvrier in which Victor Maurel is presented as one of his best friends.

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science (Singing Renewed by Science). This brief pamphlet, published in 1892, argues that 'concerning vocal technique, there are two paths, and two paths only, which a pedagogy truly worthy of the name may take: empiricism and science'.[13] Art and science are not incompatible, Maurel contends, but rather complementary. Science begins with positive facts in order to elaborate a general law: an idea which is a truth. In contrast, 'the starting point of art is an Idea . . . which has to be . . . part of the truth, or, more simply, a truth'.[14] Art thus gives rise to positive facts and effects, while science begins with positive facts in order to observe causes, to compare them and relate them to others. Moreover, 'all the arts in which the artistic effect is achieved only through an expenditure of the organism itself are closely related to physiological science'.[15]

In his course at the EHES, Maurel developed his scientific vision of the actor-singer's art more fully. While physiology was considered in *Le Chant rénové par la science* as the basis for all vocal training, as well as for dancing or gymnastics, the singer now integrated new elements, inspired by contemporary research, especially psychology. At the time, some of psychology's first partisans were scholars fascinated by music: for instance, Lionel Dauriac, Professor of Musical Aesthetics at the Sorbonne, also conducted hypnotic experiments with Lina de Ferkel. It is within such a context that Maurel's inaugural lecture, in its published form, focused entirely on hypnosis.

Musical Hypnosis

The extensive history of music's relationship to hypnosis remains unwritten.[16] Such an account could begin with Mesmer's use of the glass harmonica in his therapeutics and follow subsequent developments throughout the nineteenth century. Music was valued as an accompaniment to trance states, as a way to produce new suggestions or as a form of hypnosis itself. It was part of the sadistic experiments that Lafontaine

[13] 'Pour la technique du chant, il est deux voies, et il n'est que deux voies que puisse prendre un enseignement vraiment digne de ce nom: l'empirisme et la science.' V. Maurel 1892, 12.

[14] 'L'art a pour point de départ une Idée, . . . qui forcément doit être . . . une des facettes de la vérité, ou, plus simplement, une vérité.' Maurel 1892, 25.

[15] 'tous les arts où l'effet artistique se réalise uniquement dans une dépense de notre organisme lui-même sont en un rapport étroit avec la science physiologique'. Maurel 1892, 28.

[16] For some elements of this nascent history, see Kennaway 2012b. I am currently working on a monograph exploring aspects of this history during the nineteenth century.

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conducted both in public and private spaces, and was frequently the main attraction of large-scale hypnotic performances, such as the ones staged by Donato.[17] In *fin-de-siècle* Paris, music was still qualified by Doctor Foveau de Courmelles as 'one of the best ways to reach a state of ecstasy'.[18]

What had changed by the last decades of the nineteenth century, though, was that music was no longer used in a vague or generic way. Until that time, doctors and practitioners of hypnosis had only mentioned 'joyful', 'sad' or 'martial' pieces, polkas, minuets or religious hymns, whose titles and composers were almost never specified.[19] These musical pieces were generally played only on the piano, in order to provoke effects which were analysed in terms of automatism: hypnotised bodies were described as automata, 'forced' to move or to dance according to certain kinds of music. What Maurel described, however, corresponded to a new, more sophisticated approach to music, typical of the *fin de siècle*.

Maurel's experiment took place thanks to Jules Bois, a fascinating omnifarious figure who wrote many historical, spiritual and journalistic essays, as well as literary texts ranging from novels and poetry to theatre. Bois also wrote a tragedy, *Hippolyte couronné*, in which Maurel played the role of Thésée in Orange on 30 July 1904, and at the Odéon on 22 March the following year.[20] Like many other occultists, Bois had attended hypnotic sessions organised by Albert de Rochas, the administrator of the École polytechnique and prolific author of books devoted to hypnosis or past lives – including *Les Sentiments, la musique et le*

[17] Born in France, Charles Lafontaine, who failed as an actor, became wealthy as a travelling magnetiser. He created a kind of stage demonstration that he toured across Europe between 1840 and 1852, using trained subjects as well as volunteers from the audience. He created a public sensation by inserting needles into his subjects, thus playing on sadism, transgression and fear (see Lafontaine 1852, 1866). Donato was the pseudonym of Alfred Édouard D'Hont, a former Belgian navy official, who in the 1870s and 1880s conducted successful tours all across Europe. Donato had recourse to complex techniques, ranging from several kinds of sleep induction to authoritarian suggestion, which eventually gave rise to Donatism. He used his gaze rather than his hands, applying his methods publicly, and quite violently, not only on selected and trained individuals, but on groups of mostly young spectators from the audience. Doctors such as Jean-Martin Charcot, Cesare Lombroso and Charles Richet attended Donato's highly controversial performances (see Gallini 1983, 211–56). In both Lafontaine's and Donato's performances, music was involved.

[18] 'La musique est l'un des meilleurs moyens d'extase.' Courmelles 1890, 104.

[19] See, for instance, Pitres 1884, 23.

[20] Jules Bois (1868–1943), one of Joris-Karl Huysmans's only close friends, would later become a traditionalist Catholic. He was also the partner for many years of the soprano Emma Calvé, who was one of Maurel's pupils. See Dubois 2006.

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Figure 4.1 Cover illustration for Albert de Rochas, *Les Sentiments, la musique et le geste* (Grenoble: Librairie Dauphine, 1900) (collection Frigau Manning).

geste, published in 1900.[21] This book is magnificently illustrated, and features on the cover a portrait by Alfons Mucha of Lina de Ferkel allegorising *La Marseillaise* (see Figure 4.1), with many other photos of her inside, including some by Nadar.

[21] de Rochas 1900.

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Lina was a professional model who worked for painters such as Mucha and Georges Rochegrosse. In fact, it was thanks to Mucha that she began to work with de Rochas.[22] She was subsequently one of the two most famous hypnotic prima donnas of the time, along with the subject hypnotised by Émile Magnin, Magdeleine G.[23] Magdeleine G., a pseudonym for Madeleine Guipet, came from a family of professional dancers. According to Magnin, she never received any specific training in dance, but attended the Conservatoire de musique, where she took piano and singing classes with good results. Magnin claimed that timidity and laziness prevented her from embarking on a professional artistic career. She married, had two children, and first consulted Magnin in the hopes that he could heal her chronic headaches. Both women abundantly fuelled contemporary debates on the status of their performances. Were such displays imitations of art, or even fake art, intentionally created by simulators bored by the routine domestic life that was the lot of women at the time? Or were they, for contemporary spectators, in fact true artistic visions, inspired under influence by 'unconscious artists'?[24] This very question played a crucial part in their growing publicity and success. As far as Lina is concerned, for instance, Bois helped to create her celebrity by organising public events at La Bodinière in Monte Carlo in 1898. It is important to realise, meanwhile, that these exhibitions cannot merely be understood as society events that instrumentalised the female body for the pleasure of male audiences. Bois was a determined feminist, and his hypnosis sessions were included in an extensive programme which boasted occultist presentations from 'the thought-reader' Mr Ninoff, presentations promoting feminism – with subjects ranging from George Sand to 'the failure of marriage' – and *tableaux vivants* entitled 'The Greatest Feminine Figures of History'.[25]

In spite of such contexts, Bois's engagement in contemporary feminist discourses does not, of course, preclude the potential objectification of the

[22] See Arnauld 2009.

[23] Magnin [1906]. Magnin's book was illustrated with Fred Boissonnas's photographs: see Eidenbenz 2011. The expression 'prima donna' was used at the time, typically in an ironic way, to qualify the women who were magnetised in public performances or shows throughout the nineteenth century (see, for example, Alexandre Erdan's (1860, 1:39) description of a session featuring the magnetiser Dupotet). Some of these women, however, achieved prominent reputations, such as Prudence Bernard, married to the magnetiser Auguste Lassaigne, or, among Charcot's subjects at the Salpêtrière, Geneviève de Loudun, Augustine G. and Blanche (Marie) Wittman. In *fin-de-siècle* Paris, Lina de Ferkel and Magdeleine G. were, as far as I know, the only women whose status as artists was least considered and discussed.

[24] See Gallini 1983, 115–37; and Carroy 1991, 65–96.

[25] See [unsigned] 1898.

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hypnotised female subject. In a situation combining spectacle, revelation, authority and control, the sexualisation of the observed female body is never far away, even (or especially) among artists and spectators who aspire to a state of primarily aesthetic apprehension. Crucially, hypnosis thus lends its weight to an apparent sexualisation of the female artistic body, yet not in the way we might expect. Though the hypnotised female subject is nominally under male control, the autonomy and self-determination of her gestures invests her with an agency that implicitly opposes unwanted male power. The erotic context is complicated further by the possibility that it was precisely this increased agency that male spectators found sexually appealing: the fantasy not of the helpless female somnambulist, but of the animated heroine, instilled with knowledge of what she desires and determined to attain it.

Though it would be reductive to see this spectacular, gestural revelation as a simple instrumentalisation – with the hypnotic experience as an 'excuse' for sexual excitation – the two aspects are far from mutually exclusive, and indeed participate in a complex interplay of spectacle, desire and belief. Is such a performance part of a sexual, and not merely social, emancipation? Against this optimistic vision, however, we are confronted in Maurel's text with the clear progression of Lina's corporeality when in a hypnotic state, from her 'robust frame', evoking the actual presence of the flesh, to the increasingly more subtle manners of a codified bourgeois woman. Beginning with childish or crude 'hesitation and fumbling', she progresses under hypnosis to 'delicate little steps' and 'exquisite bows', as though the hypnotic experience were paramount to her discovery, or at least heightening, of her own bourgeois feminine identity – and there is of course a specific kind of excitement provided by the transformation of a common woman into the projected image of an upper-class lady. Given Lina's provisional access to a superior social and sexual status, the passage's eventual climax appropriately participates in a peculiarly orgasmic rhetoric, as though Lina were reproducing an ecstatic state of sexual intensity filtered through a distinctly male gaze: 'Her chest was pounding, her wild and exalted eyes had become disproportionately enlarged, all her beautiful tensed body, raised up by a fanatical enthusiasm.'

Lina's association with classical models, primarily via her dress, is similarly sexually ambiguous. Does it increase her sexualisation for the reason that it connects her with an Attic and divine sensuality, or rather decrease it because of the soberness of the classical ideal? When Bois brought Lina de Ferkel to Maurel, the event remained private, despite being recorded by a journalist and by de Rochas.

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Such a context reinforced the intimacy on which Lina and Magdeleine played; garbed in free-flowing clothes recalling antique togas or Isadora Duncan's tunics, they appeared to express, in poses of self-abandonment, the secrets of their unconscious.[26] Both performed their musical suggestions with a minimalist *mise en scène*: generally only a piano, occasionally accompanied by other instruments or voices, a rug to create the 'stage',[27] and sometimes some accessories, like the fan evoked by Maurel (see Figure 4.2). The musicians, all relevant figures of their time, were announced by name either in the media or in the programmes that Magnin includes in an appendix, and comprised such singers as Emma Calvé and Jane Hatto, and composers like Léopold Ketten and Joseph Bizet. The precise nature of the music played mattered greatly: both de Rochas and Magnin give extensive details about the pieces chosen from the works of Richard Wagner, Frédéric Chopin or Charles Gounod. They do not simply aim at drawing general correspondences between the music and the sequence of gestures. What matters is to carefully close-read musical sections and gestural syntax. Generic oppositions such as sad, joyful, martial, etc., are refined into subcategories, with precise examples of pieces, gestures and images for each. Automatism is still at work here: for de Rochas, melody is expressed by the upper part of the body, rhythm by the lower part, and there is a link between certain notes – low or high, sharp or flat – and certain gestures. But automatism is made more complex by parameters such as heredity, culture, education and national origins. What now takes place in the theorisations of musical hypnosis is a holistic reflection on specific individuals (gifted with individual names), whose specific histories, personalities and psychological features are investigated.

But what can we say in all this concerning opera? What does it stand for in these programmes and reflections? First, opera seems perfectly adapted to the hypnotic musical session, which relies on the union of gesture and music. Of course, these are not united within the same body (the actor-singer's), for in the hypnotic theatre, gesture is enacted by the

[26] Coined in German (as *Unbewusste*) by Friedrich Schelling in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) and later introduced into English by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), the term 'unconscious' was frequently used as an adjective as well as an adverb ('unconsciously') before imposing itself as a noun. Both forms commonly appear in writings related to magnetism and hypnosis throughout the nineteenth century. On the history of the concept, covering the early history of psychology and psychoanalysis and including Franz Anton Mesmer, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler and Pierre Janet, see Ellenberger 1970.

[27] See, for instance, Carbonnelle 1903.

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Figure 4.2 *Un Vieux menuet dansé par Lina*, in Rochas, *Les Sentiments*, 169 (collection Frigau Manning).

body of the hypnotic subject, while music comes from the singer's body, which restrains itself from making any kind of gesture. Opera, furthermore, provides well-known music for the audiences of the hypnosis sessions. Lina, however, is in a different situation: she is familiar with the famous operatic pieces played during these sessions, but not with the operatic spectacle itself. Last but not least, opera is considered 'objective music' which has a more precise force of suggestion and, according to de

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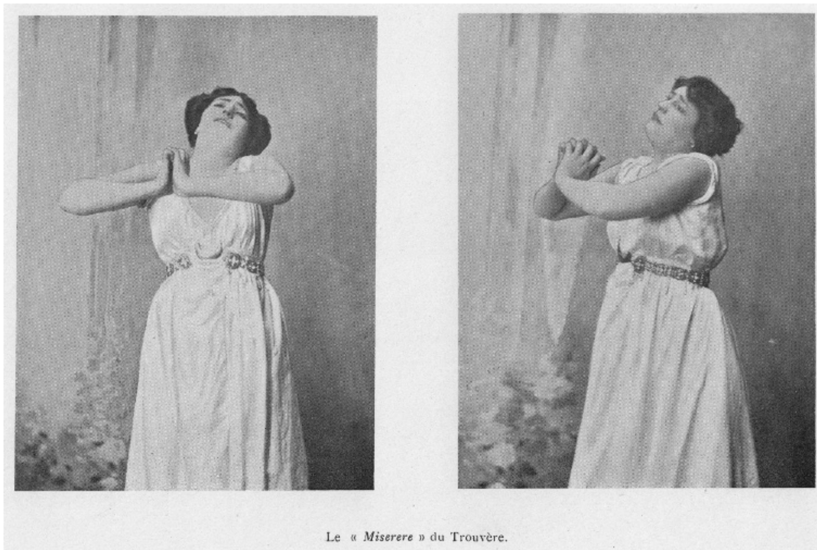

Figure 4.3 *Le 'Miserere' du* Trouvère, in Rochas, *Les Sentiments*, 177 (collection Frigau Manning).

Rochas, gives better results when combined with hypnosis than 'subjective music'. De Rochas takes and refines this distinction from Sully-Prudhomme's reflection on 'subjective' and 'objective' expression of a musical piece, according to an emotional barometer that allows the listener to associate particular music more or less precisely with a particular emotion.[28] With Verdi's music, considered to be more 'objective' by de Rochas, the great aesthetic battles of the time seem re-enacted in the hypnotic session, for the rivalry between the two 'unconscious artists', Lina and Magdeleine, plays on the storied Verdi/Wagner opposition: Lina being more Verdian (see Figure 4.3), while the more avant-garde Magdeleine becomes a Wagnerian.[29] It is in this context that Maurel went beyond the musical themes usually played on the piano. 'Victor Maurel . . . who is not only a singer of great talent, but also an erudite psychologist, hummed some Italian songs.' This, at least, was what a journalist reported; but while Lina was being hypnotised, Maurel, as we have seen, in fact chose a very specific Verdi piece: 'Era la notte' from *Otello*.[30]

[28] Sully-Prudhomme, quoted in de Rochas 1900, 139. [29] de Rochas 1900, 97.

[30] 'Victor Maurel . . . n'est pas seulement un chanteur de grand talent, mais aussi un psychologue conscient de son métier, fredonna quelques chansons italiennes.' Quoted in de Rochas 1900, 186.

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Hypnotic Verdi: Reading *Otello* through the Prism of Hypnosis

Considering his relationship with the role of Iago, Maurel's choice is perhaps unsurprising. Verdi had been thinking of the baritone since the opera's genesis, and indeed Maurel created the role in 1887 at La Scala in Milan.[31] But given the opera's plot and the musical rhetoric of suggestion rooted in Iago's role, 'Era la notte' also seems to musically parallel the situation of hypnosis, as Iago simultaneously lulls Otello's reasoning faculty to sleep and awakens his suspicions. Indeed, the whole opera might be fruitfully considered through the prism of a kind of obsession akin to hypnosis. Though the notion has not yet been treated to an in-depth analysis, some Shakespeare scholars have linked hypnosis to *Othello* in passing – not as a basis for a reading of the work, but as a descriptive analogy, with Iago being presented as a 'hypnotic villain' and Othello acting 'as if hypnotised'.[32] Concerning Verdi's opera, Daniel Albright even suggested that 'Othello is an ideal hypnotic subject, infinitely susceptible, carried away by Iago's suggestions.'[33] And indeed, many elements of Arrigo Boito and Verdi's *Otello* can be fruitfully read in light of the nineteenth-century culture of hypnosis and psychology.

Why such recourse to the hypnotic hypothesis? Jealousy, even supreme jealousy, may indeed be insufficient to understand how Otello – presented for the entire first act as the noble 'Duce' of the explosive 'Esultate', triumphant over Venice's enemy and the storms of the sea – could become the victim of Iago's Machiavellian insinuations. And inversely, describing Iago as cruel, even radically cruel, may be insufficient to explain his attitude. 'Your demon drives you, and I am that demon. And I am driven by mine, in which I believe, a merciless god'[34] (Act II scene 1). Iago's circular credo must be understood literally: he is a 'demon' able to influence any victim he latches onto, from Cassio and Roderigo to Otello, whose spirit and heart he manages to infect,

[31] Conati and Medici 2015, 95. [32] See, for instance, Burke 2007, 244.

[33] Albright 2014, 111. Moving instead from medicine to performance studies, the link between Othello and hypnosis has also been mentioned, albeit in a cursory way, in medical and psychology texts, such as by David B. Cheek: 'The mechanisms by which hypnosis can do harm are not different from the tools which Lady Macbeth used on her husband, which Cassius used on the honorable Brutus, which Iago used on Othello. We can do more harm with ignorance of hypnosis than we can by intelligently using the forces of suggestion' (Cheek 1958, 177; quoted in Kroger 2008, 104).

[34] 'Ti spinge il tuo dimone, / e il tuo dimon son io. / E me trascina il mio, nel quale io credo / inesorato Iddio.'

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contaminate and control. He presents himself as being similarly under influence, yet in a spiralling hierarchy of control wherein he is gifted with greater power. For a nineteenth-century audience versed in constantly circulating stories of magnetism and hypnosis, Otello's drama may not immediately have seemed that of a brave, noble general who happens to have one tragic flaw – jealousy – which leads him to be duped by Iago and to murder his beloved wife. In Boito and Verdi's *Otello*, Iago does not appear as the instrument of a tragedy that would have occurred in any case. This implies another vision of *Otello*'s drama: as the fruit of destiny and bad luck more than the effect of tragedy.

Otello is thus in many ways the unfortunate story of a noble man who happens to meet an 'evil spirit', as defined, for instance, by the anonymous 1911 *Traité sur l'obsession* (A Treatise on Obsession) with its subtitle *L'obsession a pour base la suggestion* (Suggestion as the Basis for Obsession).[35] Indeed, the notion of obsession had recently been medicalised. In Dechambre's medical dictionary, obsession – drawn from the 'occult sciences' – was defined as 'the state of a person tortured by a demon, while possession refers to the enduring presence of the demon within the body. Dreams and set delirious ideas, voices which hallucinating people hear, can take on the character of obsession.'[36] Otello, like many other nineteenth-century figures who inhabit fantastical tales, embodies one of the era's most terrifying nightmares: that of a man who, in spite of his lofty spiritual qualities, and perhaps because of his 'nervous temperament', is fundamentally unable to escape the negative influence of a magnetiser who succeeds in abolishing any interior resistance in his victim.[37] Such a magnetiser accomplishes this not only by what he says (or sings), but by the way he says it, with his powerful gazes, manners, intonations and modes of speech. Like hypnosis, Verdi's musical language may induce a specific type of vocal interpretation, somewhere between speaking and chanting, with work on rhythms, breathing and intonation.

[35] 'Esprit malveillant'. [unsigned] 1911b, 3. On obsession, see Davis 2008, esp. 31–104.

[36] 'Dans les sciences occultes, l'obsession est l'état d'une personne tourmentée par un démon, tandis que la possession indique le séjour permanent du démon dans le corps. Les rêves et les idées délirantes fixes, les voix qu'entendent les hallucinés peuvent prendre le caractère d'obsession.' Dechambre 1875, 14:71.

[37] For two canonical examples of such figures, see Hoffmann 1982, 85–126; and Poe 1998, 239–48. Not all nineteenth-century scientists agreed with Charcot that hypnotism was a pathological effect of hysteria. According to many, however, nervous individuals – especially women – were more likely to respond to hypnotism and suggestion. See, for instance, Richer and Tourette 1875, 15:73.

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Hypnosis had in fact long been considered as a form of psychic power and abolishment of free will: a way to take control of another person for better or for worse – to heal the subject or, on the contrary, order him to commit crimes.[38] In writings of the time related to hypnosis, two fantasies dominate: first, the unconscious woman raped or abused in her sleep either by a cruel, premeditating criminal, or else by a weak man influenced by her unintentional charms; a woman who in both cases is completely amnesiac and unable to remember anything that occurred. And second, the honest, resourceful man who, when manipulated by a criminal hypnotiser, becomes a criminal himself, ready to commit the most hideous of crimes under influence.

Otello is arguably an operatic incarnation of the latter. The murder is Iago's own suggestion: 'It's much better to suffocate her in her bed where she has sinned.'[39] Throughout the entire opera, Otello corporeally shows both the psychological and physiological effects of Iago's influence – such as his headache after his violent refusal to intervene in Cassio's favour at Desdemona's request (Act II scene 4), his fainting after the malediction scene at the end of Act III, and – ultimately – his suicide.[40] But the question is not only a medical one, for the juridical issues concerning hypnosis were also widely explored at the time: 'Has a crime been committed? Immediately, hypnotism is invoked, and the suggestion appears, dominating everything. It is claimed that free will is an empty word and the hypnotised subject is called an automaton.'[41] To the question: is a man guilty when he commits a crime under another's direct influence, or more explicitly in a state of hypnosis? – the answer is repeatedly: yes.[42] But the question hides a deeper interrogation connected with free will. Specifically, is the hypnotised subject acting without any participation of his or her will? Can or could he or she resist the

[38] Though there is not enough space here to fully explore the complex historical shifts in the history of hypnosis, the question of resistance is one of the fundamental differences in the nineteenth-century approach to hypnosis when compared to the modern one. Though the question of loss of control is still present in the popular imagination, twentieth-century approaches more frequently argue that hypnosis is rooted in an interpersonal relationship, and that the question of resistance is not of central importance.

[39] 'Val meglio soffocarla, / Là, nel suo letto, là, dove ha peccato' (Act III scene 7).

[40] At the time, suicide itself was in the process of being medicalised, considered as a chronic disease or a fit of insanity; see Frigau Manning 2016.

[41] 'Un crime est-il commis? Aussitôt, l'hypnotisme est invoqué, et la suggestion apparaît, dominant tout. Il est affirmé que le libre arbitre est un vain mot et le sujet hypnotisé, un automate.' Courmelles 1890, iii.

[42] See, for instance, Tourette 1887.

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hypnotist's influence? At the same time, criminal anthropologists such as Wilhelm Wundt or Cesare Lombroso dreamt about the utility of hypnosis for the moral reform of society: in a utopian future, criminals would be hypnotised by prison officers in order to transform them into good, trustful subjects, and to reintegrate them into society once the hypnotic redemption was complete.

Victor Maurel explores the penal dimension of hypnotism in his lecture, and this can also help to explain why Verdi chose not to call his opera *Iago* as he had initially planned. The final title, *Otello*, was of course a way for Verdi to claim that he was adapting Shakespeare's tragedy, while also openly competing with Rossini's *Otello*. 'I prefer them to say "He chose to wrestle with the giant and was crushed,"' Verdi told Boito in January 1886, 'rather than "He wanted to hide behind the title of Iago."'[43] But this change was above all a way to place Otello in the spotlight: 'they continue to say and to write to me "*Iago, Iago*". He is (this is true) the Demon who moves everything; but Otello is the one who acts: *He loves, is jealous, kills*, and *kills himself*. And for my part it would seem hypocrisy not to call it *Otello*.'[44] Verdi and Boito thus chose to focus the action on the murderer under influence, who is also a victim; this underlines the complexity and paradoxical issues of a crime caused not only by love or jealousy, but committed under the influence of an evil creature. 'Otello is like a man moving in a nightmare, and under the fatal, mounting domination of this nightmare he thinks, acts, moves, suffers and commits his dreadful crime', Boito wrote to Verdi in October 1880.[45] The question of Otello's loss of free will under influence remains open, as it would in the contemporary debates on hypnosis.

Victor Maurel's choice of a number from this opera for his hypnotic session thus seems highly appropriate, and gives a special aura to his experiment. But as the journalistic account states:

> Lina does not know Italian and, moreover, is one of the rare Parisians who have never listened to M. Victor Maurel. The latter felt tears come to his eyes when he saw this mere hypnotic subject, on the basis of the barely articulated vibrations of his voice, interpret the different pieces by way of gestures and

[43] Conati and Medici 2015, 96. The 'giant' was very likely Shakespeare himself and not Rossini, as suggested by the editors of the correspondence.

[44] Conati and Medici 2015, 96. There may be a distant reference here to the authority of Goethe's *Faust*, whose famous revision of Genesis was: 'In the beginning was the deed' ('Am Amfang war die Tat'). My thanks to David Trippett and Benjamin Walton for this suggestion.

[45] Conati and Medici 2015, 7.

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expressions identical to those which he himself had been able to find only after many years of work.[46]

While insisting on Maurel's emotion when confronted with Lina's spontaneous gestures, the journalist does not delve into what is perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of this experiment: how does the singer explain the fact that Lina is able to perform the same gestures? And to what extent does the use of a specific operatic piece allow him to go further in his own theoretical and practical method as an actor-singer?

A Psychological Method of Acting

Victor Maurel's approach to acting appears to be based fundamentally on psychological categories associated with hypnosis, such as identification and *objectivation*. Indeed, for the baritone, objectivation is the basis of his art. The concept is recurrent in theories of hypnosis. Charles Richet, for instance, defines objectivation as any situation in which the subject conceives of a character type, performs and 'objectivises' it: 'It is no longer like hallucinating people who contemplate, as spectators, images which unfold before their eyes; it is like an actor who, overcome by madness, imagines that the drama he acts out is reality, not a fiction, and that he has been transformed in his body and soul into the character he has been entrusted to play.'[47] Thus, when Mrs A. is told to be a peasant woman, then starts to act like one; and then is told to be an actress, a general, etc., and begins speaking and acting for each suggestion according to the 'type': 'It is not a simple dream,' as de Rochas states, quoting Richet, 'it is a *lived dream*.'[48] Mrs A. is not just imitating the emblematic poses of an actress or a general: she is truly living them. Objectivation is thus for Maurel the possibility, in an altered state of consciousness, of exteriorising passions, with major effects on the audience, through expressions and gestures which are not merely signs of the states of the

[46] 'Lina ne sait pas l'italien et, de plus, est une des rares Parisiennes n'ayant jamais entendu M. Victor Maurel. Celui-ci sentit les larmes lui venir aux yeux en voyant ce simple sujet hypnotique, aux vibrations à peine articulées de sa voix, interpréter ces différents morceaux par des gestes et des expressions identiques à ceux qu'il n'avait pu trouver qu'après bien des années de travail.' de Rochas 1900, 186.

[47] 'Ce n'est plus seulement à la façon de l'halluciné qui assiste en spectateur à des images se déroulant devant lui; c'est comme un acteur qui, pris de folie, s'imaginerait que le drame qu'il joue est une réalité, non une fiction, et qu'il a été transformé de corps et d'âme dans le personnage qu'il est chargé de jouer.' Charles Richet, quoted in de Rochas 1900, 79.

[48] de Rochas 1900, 79.

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soul, but *are* these states themselves. To him, 'the intensity of objectivation is always linked to the intensity and appropriateness of the prior mental identification'.[49]

In this sense, Maurel firmly denies Denis Diderot's famous theory. Acting is not about elaborating exterior images of characters, but rather about creating and working with internal images. Giving the most prominent place to imagination in his psychological theory, Maurel seems to follow contemporary research conducted by psychologists such as Lionel Dauriac or Théodule Ribot. In the case of voluntary weeping, for example, Dauriac argues that 'it is not by the action of their will that these people cry, but thanks to representative images: they imagine the state they want to produce'.[50] As for Ribot, he devotes a whole 'Essay on the Creative Imagination' to the question, stating that 'imagination, in the intellectual order, is the equivalent of will in the realm of movements'.[51] He goes on to identify the imagination's various factors, intellectual, emotional and unconscious: 'All forms of the creative imagination imply elements of feeling,' he argues, and in the case of aesthetic creation, 'affective states become material for the creative activity'.[52] Ribot's theories had at the same period a remarkable influence on Constantin Stanislavsky, whose famous 'system of acting' relies on his reading of the distinction between intellectual and emotional memory, the latter involving a change in bodily state.[53] Indeed, the parallel with Maurel's reflection is striking:

What you see of great artists on stage is in no way the most difficult aspect of their art. The difficult and strenuous part is what you cannot see at all, it is the inner state which lies beneath all this mimicry, all these accents, all these vocal inflections, and gives them that appearance of life which makes such an impression on you; it is this

[49] V. Maurel 1904, 2.

[50] 'ce n'est pas par l'action de leur simple volonté que ces personnes pleurent, mais par l'intermédiaire d'images représentatives: elles se représentent l'état qu'elles désirent produire'. Lionel Dauriac, paraphrased in Cabanès 1926, 156.

[51] Ribot 1906, 9. Ribot was the first person to complete a PhD in psychology based on a scientific method, the first to be in charge of a course on experimental psychology at the Sorbonne, and the first psychologist to be awarded a chair of 'Experimental and Comparative Psychology' at the Collège de France. See Nicolas 2005, 6.

[52] Ribot 1906, 32–3.

[53] As reported by W. Rose (2008, 56), Stanislavsky underlined in red the following text from Ribot's conclusion to *The Psychology of the Emotions* (1911, 163): 'The recollection of a feeling, it will be said, has this special property, that it is associated with organic and physiological states which make of it a real emotion. I reply that it *must* be so, for an emotion which does not vibrate through the whole body is nothing but a purely intellectual state.'

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state that artists must laboriously organise, to create in themselves, and in which they can only maintain themselves on stage by a continuous effort of innervation and voluntary imagination.[54]

Maurel encourages the actor to work with his or her imagination not in order to create images which are externally imitated or presented to the audience, but to internalise them, or to find them in their inner self – images which thus become active, and are accompanied by all the requisite expressions and gestures.

Autosuggestion plays a central role here, for the question Maurel asks is: 'Do we have the means to create in ourselves a state of even transitory hypnosis?'[55] Drawing from theories such as those of the Swedish psychiatrist Fredrik Johan Björnström, he presents hypnosis as being 'caused . . . by central excitation in the brain, by psychical action on the imagination, or by *suggestion* – as it is called in modern language'.[56] In a renewed approach to acting, autosuggestion allows the actor-singer to draw on his or her profound interiority not only to recall memories of lived moments, but also to let rise within spontaneous, detailed creations of the imagination, bringing a range of gestures up to the bodily surface. Such gestures, with no intervention from the faculty of reason, are more than simple signs of an affect which captures the soul: they are truly *part* of this affect, allowing the singer to use interiority as a space for creating artificial but true emotional states – true because they are free from any historical determination.

Where, though, do these gestures actually come from? What happens, according to Maurel, when Lina is able to locate gestures that she cannot possibly have observed on the operatic stage? How does he explain that the subject is able to find the same gestures herself – or more precisely, why does he want to believe this, and want us to believe this in turn? Maurel provides no definitive answers, presenting only the events of this strange situation. The mystery remains absolute. We can only sketch out hypotheses, evoking some of the theories then in vogue. Those concerning telepathy, for instance, may have been used to explain why Lina, without

[54] 'Ce que vous voyez d'un grand artiste sur la scène, cela n'est point le difficile de son art. Le difficile, l'ardu, c'est ce que vous ne voyez point, c'est l'état intérieur qui sous-tend toute cette mimique, tous ces accents, toutes ces inflexions vocales et leur donne cette apparence de vie qui vous étonne; c'est cet état que l'artiste a dû péniblement organiser, créer en lui et au niveau duquel il ne se maintient à présent sur la scène que par un effort continu d'innervation et d'imagination volontaires.' V. Maurel 1904, 9.

[55] 'Avons-nous . . . les moyens de créer en nous un état d'hypnose même passager?' Victor Maurel 1904, 11.

[56] Björnström 1889, 18.

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knowing any Italian, seemed to read in the singer's mind the appropriate gestures – and indeed the hypnotised subject as a thought-reader is a common trope. Other hypotheses might have connected Lina's performance with her potential access to a collective memory: her gestures emerging from an individual unconscious which, thanks to hypnosis, would be able to communicate with a collective one, deeply rooted in the self, thereby creating a truth of expression liberated from social conventions and historical bounds. Other explanations may have been inspired by a sort of Schopenhauerian aesthetics, and predicated on faith in the musical power of reminiscences.

As is well known, Arthur Schopenhauer's theories influenced a range of contemporary philosophers and readers, including two of Maurel's most influential figures of reference, Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche. For Schopenhauer, every human existence, and indeed existence itself, is subject to the continuous, unavoidable repetition which defines the principle of Will. Only art allows men to free themselves from repetition, at least for a brief moment, through creation or contemplation. These moments are characterised by phenomena that resonate with the process of hypnosis: a detachment from space and time, absorption and projection in the act of contemplation. 'If life is iteration,' as Cécile Wolff puts it, 'art is reminiscence (obscure reminiscence of what was, before anything, the origins of repetitions).'[57] Imagination, as inspired by the receptive state created by hypnosis, allows the self-hypnotised actor to find gestures conceived as primary reminiscences.

Maurel does not then merely consider hypnosis as a way to train artists or to perfect his own art, as was the case in de Rochas's or Magnin's approach wherein Lina and Magdeleine were presented as 'ideal models', sources of inspiration or proof that a gesture, applied to this or that emotion, was the right one.[58] Rather, Maurel seeks to transmit a range of techniques he locates in hypnosis in order to train the imagination, to define and refine its skills in autosuggestion. To demonstrate how powerful the imagination can be in constructing new moral or immoral images of the self, he uses a provocative example, exploring the juridical dimension to make an unusual point. He chooses the Hugoesque figure of a man who has committed homicide in order to save his family. Ten years have passed, the perpetrator of the crime has not been found and the man has lived an utterly honest life – that is, until he begins to fall under suspicion. Being guilty, the man is unable to imitate the convincing accents of indignation

[57] See Wolff 2009, 155. [58] See, for instance, de Rochas 1900, 47–8.

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that would be characteristic of an innocent man, and the 'innocent man' is truly a role that he must approach gradually, internalising it before he is able to embody it. 'This man, in this moment, is in an intermediary region between life and art,' Maurel says; he has to 'provoke within his inner self an artificial state' which cannot merely be simulated, 'to go directly to the greatest art, the one which, in one word, in one gesture . . . would overcome all resistance and implant conviction'.[59] He needs to develop a 'process of incubation' founded on an act of autosuggestion and language: searching for the similarities between the guilty man he is, and the innocent man he wants not to appear as, but to become. 'What he needs above all is an inner fire of sincerity where, at the proper time, he would draw on the impulse which will charge his voice, his gestures, his entire being, with truth.'[60] The work of the actor – as occurs in hypnosis – involves a transformation. Once the new image of the self is born, once the autosuggestion is enacted, all the rest – gestures, intonations, states of being – will naturally perfect and complete the character.

Conclusions

Maurel's experiment with hypnosis seems to have been a singular event, never repeated. But it came to occupy a significant place in his theory of acting. Beyond the social event, the episode reveals a vital aspect of the singer's professional life. On the one hand, his teaching, extending into the context of higher education, was not confined to private classes with singers such as Emma Calvé, or the school he founded in Paris in 1906 and later took to New York. On the other hand, and in contrast to what Verdi's letters may lead us to believe, his position as chair at the EHES proves that Maurel's research towards a 'singing renewed by science' was not an eccentric part of his activities; rather, there emerges the figure of a researcher active across a wide epistemological spectrum, and within a dynamic research community of artistic and scientific knowledge.[61]

[59] 'Cet homme, en l'instant, est dans une région intermédiaire à la vie et à l'art . . . susciter en lui un état artificiel . . . aller tout droit au grand art, à celui qui dès le premier mot, dès le premier geste, impressionne, empoigne, terrasse les résistances et implante la conviction.' V. Maurel 1904, 12–13.

[60] 'processus d'incubation'; 'ce qu'il lui faut à tout prix, c'est un foyer intérieur de sincérité où, le moment venu, il puisera l'impulsion qui animera de vérité sa voix, ses gestes, tout son être'. V. Maurel 1904, 13.

[61] See Henson 2007.

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Engrossed in the changing relationships between body, the psyche and the moral self, Maurel contributed to the *fin-de-siècle* search for various forms of non-rational knowledge. This is the reason why, at the crossroads of the history of medicine, psychology and opera, we find in Maurel's text a valuable way to rethink the relationships between the epistemologies of science and music at the dawn of the twentieth century. Maurel's acting theories were not 'inspired by' a comparison with hypnosis: they were deeply interwoven with the concepts, ideas and images of hypnosis itself. Hypnosis constitutes here a proactive artistic method: it is both an experiment and an experience, in the dual senses of the French '*expérience*' – an experiment, for it is a test that Maurel carries out in the intimacy of his salon transformed into an imaginary laboratory. It is also, however, a veritable lived experience, as it allows Maurel to acquire dreamt knowledge through a body in action: the body of the other, and, in this case, the body of the unconscious artist – Lina's body.

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