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Termini, Olga (1993) "The Role of Diction and Gesture in Italian Baroque opera," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 6: No. 2, Article 7.
DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199306.02.07
Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol6/iss2/7>

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Baroque Operatic Acting

The Role of Diction and Gesture in Italian Baroque Opera

Olga Termini

Among the more formidable challenges for any opera singer is that of combining singing with acting in the portrayal of a character. To act a part without sacrificing vocal finesse, or to sing a role while at the same time interpreting it dramatically has always been demanding. Moreover, an ideal of balance has rarely been achieved.

In Italian baroque opera the emphasis appears to have shifted. Opera from its origins had been drama-oriented. The concerns of the *camerata* and the emergence of the *stile recitativo* attest primarily to the goal of "moving the affections" through the words. Later, however, attention was directed more fully to the music, so much so that opera was sometimes characterized simply as a "concert on stage." Nonetheless, theorists and commentators, both early and late, had much to say in common regarding acting (or the lack of it). They quite universally emphasized the importance of diction as well as of expressivity and naturalness in the use of gesture. Thus, while acting may have declined in quality in the later baroque, it was still a major concern for commentators.

Although until now the performance of baroque opera has been looked upon largely in terms of the music, in terms of the singing styles or ornamentation, etc., relatively little attention has been directed toward aspects of the drama itself, toward the manner of acting, or how word and movement were used as part of a total spectacle. Such aspects were a matter of considerable concern, however, not only for observers and critics, but for composers as well. The present essay will examine Italian baroque opera from the vantage point of acting, focusing on the attitudes of contemporaries, particularly in regard to diction and gesture.

Early Italian Opera Composers

The earliest opera composers were preoccupied with word and drama. Peri sought a singing style that would "imitate speech in song,"¹ while Monteverdi's avowed aim was to make "the words the mistress of the harmony."² Gagliano, in his Preface to *Dafne* (1608), exhorted the singer to "try to pronounce every syllable distinctly so that the words [would be] understandable," and further that this should be "the principal aim of every singer . . . especially when performing on the stage."³ Gagliano also offers detailed instructions concerning how in one scene, the singer should synchronize his gestures with the music. As he described it, Apollo's combat with the python required great physical agility in "shaking his bow, brandishing his arrows in his hand, regulating every step, every gesture to the singing of the chorus." He also indicated that a fine singer might not always have the skills of a fencer or dancer and may grow fatigued after the combat scene; and that therefore two Apollos (each dressed alike) could be employed, the first executing the combat, the second (i.e. the singer) entering only after the death of the python.⁴ Alessandro Guidotti, in his Preface to Cavalieri's *Rappresentazione di Anima e di Corpo* (1600), expressed a similar concern: that the words be clearly pronounced, and that the "gestures and movements not only of the hands, but other gestures [be] efficacious in moving the affections."⁵

¹Cited by Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1950), 374.

²Strunk, *Source Readings*, 407.

³See Carol MacClintock, ed. *Readings in the History of Music in Performance* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1982), 188.

⁴MacClintock, *Readings*, 191.

⁵MacClintock, *Readings*, 182.

Here is how the practitioners of early opera spelled out their requirements for an opera singer, one must to begin with have a beautiful voice, good intonation, and good vocal support (as Guidotti emphasized). But excellent diction, expressiveness in singing, and skill in acting followed closely behind. Not surprisingly, Monteverdi stressed these prerequisites whenever he was engaged in the casting of a singer. For instance, in his directives to one Signorina Margherita (letter of 1627) he showed a minute attentiveness to the movements that were to take place on stage. She needed "to become a brave soldier" and "to master the appropriate gestures completely, now bold, now timid, without fear or restraint." And he added further, "For I am inclined to have her be bold in the imitation of the music, the actions, and the changes of time . . ."⁶ Monteverdi also demanded that ample rehearsal time be allowed for a dramatic production. As he himself indicated, "*Aranna* required five months of strenuous rehearsal after the cast had learned their parts by heart," presumably to perfectly coordinate matters of action with the music.⁷ Still another concern was the physical appearance of the singer. Monteverdi's first Orfeo, Francesco Rasi, cautioned that "ugly actions, such as mouth and shoulder movements, and others" should be avoided, attributing these to the French; Rasi begged his patron, the Duke of Mantua, not to let this (French) style spoil "the full sweep of Italian gracefulness" (*tutto il garbo italiano*),⁸ in the instruction of a pupil.

In Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* (1643) the role of Ottavia was played by Anna Renzi, whose dramatic rendition of the lament was described by her patron Giulio Strozzi.⁹ Strozzi points especially to her superior acting powers: "she transforms herself into the personage which she represents" her responses did not seem memorized, but seemed "born at the moment" (*nati all'ora*). And in *La finta pazzo* (Venice, 1641) she was

⁶Letter to Alessandro Striggio (July 10, 1627), as translated in *The Monteverdi Companion*, Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune, eds., 71.

⁷Letter to Striggio (January 9, 1620), in which Monteverdi discusses preparations for his now lost opera *Apollo*.

⁸Arnold and Fortune, *Monteverdi Companion*, 49-50. A century later Le Cerf de la Viéville, a Frenchman highly critical of Italian singing, attributes this same undesirable trait to the Italians; see Strunk, *Source Readings*, 502.

⁹In an essay in her honor entitled *Le glorie della Signora Anna Renzi romana* (Venice, 1644) quoted by Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth Century Venice: the Creation of a Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 429.

"just as valiant in acting as she was excellent in music," and was thereby able to pretend as well as imitate madness to perfection.¹⁰

Critical and Literary Sources

Theoretical writings of the time also give considerable attention to the acting of opera. Probably the most fruitful source of information in the earlier 17th century is the anonymous treatise *Il corago* (c. 1630), where we read:

Above all, to be a good singing actor, one must also be a good speaking actor . . .¹¹

Highly practical in his approach, the author recommended that inferior actors be given inconspicuous parts and that they be positioned on stage surrounded by lots of props, such as by being "in clouds and other machines in the air."¹² He noted that audiences normally preferred an excellent actor with a mediocre voice over a superior singer who had little acting ability, and who pleased only those few who were connoisseurs of music.

The specific acting instructions in this treatise are highly detailed. A singer impersonating a noble character must move in a slow and dignified manner, accompanied by deliberate gestures. Moreover, he must have an opportunity to act, to stop, and to heave a long sigh between vocal phrases, "as nature dictates" (*come la natura gli detta*).¹³ During recitatives one was to avoid rapid movement, and this even more so during arias, unless the *affetto* demanded it, as in scenes of flights or attacks. It was deemed important to walk or act in accordance with the character during ritornelli, and not always to stand in the same spot, center stage, when singing.

Gestures were to be appropriate to the character, and (in accord with the *affetto*) synchronized with the words. Changes of *affetto* were to come at the beginning of a speech and not in the middle.¹⁴ The singer could gesture

¹⁰Rosand, *Opera*, 415.

¹¹Fabbri, Paolo, and Angelo Pompilio, eds., *Il corago o vero alcune osservazioni per metter bene in scena le composizioni drammatiche*, c. 1630 (Florence: Olschki Editore, 1983), 91. Translation is my own.

¹²*Il corago*, 92. See also Rosand, *Opera*, 244.

¹³*Il corago*, 89-90.

¹⁴*Il corago*, 97.

freely during a narrative recitative, but was to be more restrained during a soliloquy.¹⁵ Gestures of anger were to be directed *con furia* to the person addressed, while gestures of despair were to be "discretely variegated" (*regolatamente sregolata*).¹⁶

Two main criteria run through most of the Italian commentaries on acting in the early 17th century: acting was to be expressive of the *affetto*, and it was to be natural. Leone di Somi's *Dialoghi* (late 16th century) contains a chapter on acting in which the actor is admonished

to keep his head in a certain natural way so that it will not appear that it is attached to his neck with nails. And he must let his arms and his hands (when it is not necessary to gesticulate with them) go where nature directs them . . .¹⁷

A parallel may be seen in Elizabethan writings on acting. For instance, Heywood's *Apology for Actors* (1614) speaks of

a gracious and bewitching kind of action a naturall and familiar motion of the head, the hand, the body, and a moderate and fit countenance suitable to all the rest . . .¹⁸

Such qualities were noted by foreigners witnessing Italian performances. For example, André Maugars, a viol player in Rome in 1639, judged the Italian singers enthusiastically, because they

are almost all actors by nature . . . [and] they are incomparable in music for the stage, not only for their singing but also for the expression of the words, the postures, and the gestures of the characters they play naturally and very well.¹⁹

¹⁵*Il corago*, 25.

¹⁶*Il corago*, 95.

¹⁷Cited by A. M. Nagler, *A Source Book in Theatrical History* (1952, repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1959), 103.

¹⁸Nagler, *Source Book*, 124. And a parallel may be seen in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, wherein Hamlet advises the players that the purpose "both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere, the mirror up to nature."

¹⁹Cited in MacClintock, *Readings*, 122, as a translation of *Response faite à un curieux sur le Sentiment de la Musique d'Italie, écrite à Rome le premier Octobre 1639* (Paris, 1640).

Later-Baroque Italian Operatic Acting: Negative Appraisals

What was the nature of Italian operatic acting in the late baroque? Much scathing criticism was directed toward the lack of acting due to an excessive attention to vocal dexterity. Many of the negative judgments, to be sure, were colored by prejudice against the castrati; and then too a great number of disparagements came from the French quarter as part of a general anti-Italian bias.

St. Didier, attending the opera in Venice in 1685, judged the "action most commonly disagreeable" (*désagréable*). Like a true Frenchman, his criticism is even more scathing regarding the dancers, whom he imagined as wearing lead in their shoes. But he is positive in regard to the singing: "The Charms of their Voices do make amends for all imperfections."²⁰

But many Italian authors as well, especially after the turn of the 18th century, were highly critical of the neglect of acting skills among their own countrymen. Many of these writers drew attention to the emphasis on sheer vocal technique and to the detrimental effects this had on dramatic integrity. Mid-18th century authors such as Algarotti reach an extreme verdict, putting the blame for what he perceives to be the operatic mediocrity of his time squarely on the singers:

and with their *passaggi*, their trills . . . they embellish, overload, and disfigure everything²¹

Bianchi lashes out at the "continuous screaming of high voices of persons who come and go without one's knowing what they want."²² And Riccoboni claimed that Italian opera, which he feels had come to a point of perfection in the works of A. Scarlatti and Bononcini, had witnessed a decline (during the 1740s and 50s) due to the regrettable loss of balance between acting and singing.²³

²⁰Translation by Nagler, *Source Book*, 263.

²¹Francesco Algarotti, *Saggio sopra l'opera in musica* (1755), 19. Translation of excerpts in Strunk, *Source Readings*, 668ff.

²²Giovanni Antonio Bianchi, *De i vizi e de' difetti del moderno teatro* (Rome, 1753), 93.

²³Louis Riccoboni, *Réflexions historiques et critiques sur les différens théâtres de l'Europe* (Amsterdam, 1740; repr., Bologna: Forni Editore, n. d.), 39.

But undoubtedly the most vitriolic comments of all came from Marcello, who in *Il teatro alla moda* (Venice, c. 1720) ridiculed singers for, among other things, keeping their identities separate from those of the characters they were portraying:

never listening to any other actor; saluting the people in the boxes, joking with the orchestra, etc. that people may clearly understand that he or she is not the Prince Zoroaster but Signor Forconi; not the Empress Filastroca but Signora Giandussa Pelatutti.²⁴

This kind of criticism is still echoed a half-century later by Mancini, who continued to fault singers for falling out of their roles.²⁵ And Marcello's criticism regarding the irrelevant things singers did during the ritornelli was reiterated by Durazzo thirty years later.²⁶ (Ritornelli had grown longer and the average singer was, perhaps understandably, at a loss as to what meaningful action could be performed while waiting for an entrance.)

Many of the unfavorable judgments concerning Italian singers were strongly colored by prejudice against the castrati, a tendency that only grew during the 18th century. While St. Didier and Ragueuet expressed admiration for the castrato voice, its power, flexibility, and timbre, many writers focused on the outward appearance of the castrato, and particularly on the contradiction between the voice and the body, as does Grosley,²⁷ or between the voice and the character being portrayed, as does Addison:

for who can hear without pain one of these ancient and proud Romans utter his cries through the mouth of a eunuch . . .?²⁸

²⁴Cited by Henry Pleasants in *The Great Singers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 27.

²⁵Giambattista Mancini, *Practical Reflections on Figured Singing*, the editions of 1774 and 1777 compared, translated, and edited by Edward Foreman (Champaign: Pro Musica Press, 1967), 75.

²⁶Giacomo Durazzo, *Lettre sur le mécanisme de l'opera italien* (Naples, 1756), quoted (incorrectly as by Josse de Villeneuve) by Michael F. Robinson, *Naples and Neapolitan Opera* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1984), 61.

²⁷Pier Jean Grosley, *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'Italie et les Italiens* (1764), trans. as *Neue Nachrichten oder Anmerkungen über Italien und über die Italiener* (Leipzig: 1766), 552.

²⁸Cited by Misson, vol. 4, 64.

An anonymous treatise (London, 1755) satirizes the great Farinelli for his stage appearance:

What a pipe! What modulation! What ecstasy to the ear! But heavens!
What clumsiness! What stupidity! What offense to the eye!²⁹

Perhaps our modern impressions are overly colored by such satires and the visual record of caricatures—after all, we haven't actually seen castrati, or heard them sing! But serious theorists also disapproved; Bianchi, for one, held the castrati responsible for the excessive vocal acrobatics practiced in opera,³⁰ and later in the century Planelli advocated the exclusion of castrati in favor of tenors, who would impersonate heroic figures more convincingly³¹—this, of course, proved to be prophetic for the 19th century.

Later-Baroque Operatic Acting: Some Positive Suggestions and Commentaries

Pier Francesco Tosi, in his widely circulated and translated *Observations on Florid Song*, saw expression (from the heart) to be the essential ingredient of both singing and acting:

O how great a master is the Heart! . . . own that from it you learned
the most beautiful expression, the most refined taste, the most noble
Action . . .³²

And Mancini, writing in the latter half of the 18th century, set forth some very specific and exacting requisites for the preparation of aspiring singers: they should study languages (chiefly Latin and Italian, i.e. Tuscan), learn grammar, listen to orators, read poetry aloud, and study history in order to understand the background of the historical figures they will portray on the stage—and they should study acting.³³

²⁹*Reflections upon Theatrical Expression in Tragedy* (London, 1755), quoted in Pleasants, *Great Singers*, 44.

³⁰Bianchi, *De i vizi*, 93.

³¹Antonio Planelli, *Dell'opera in musica* (Naples, 1772), 171.

³²Pier Francesco Tosi, *Observations*, 157-8.

³³Mancini, *Practical Reflections*, 65-69.

Both Tosi and Mancini lamented the neglect of the art of acting in their respective times. Tosi blamed teachers, especially for neglecting the recitative, because they disdained expression or considered it old-fashioned. But the study of recitative, according to Tosi, could even teach acting.³⁴ Mancini re-enforced this idea, claiming that singers needed to study recitative and strive for the simplicity of spoken declamation by observing the sentence structure with its periods and commas. He echoed, even quoted Tosi, on the common faults of recitative performance, its "departure from naturalness."³⁵

Mancini made it clear that no precise rules could exist concerning acting or concerning any specific gestures or attitudes the singer might strike in particular situations. Only general principles could be taught, such as entering and moving on stage gracefully, or expressing emotions through particular facial expressions. Singers must learn to move naturally, they should learn from dancers and fencers, and they should study the comic element, especially by observing the acting of the *buffi*, excellent models for opera singers in this art. However, Mancini places the responsibility for the perfecting of acting skills primarily on the young singer himself, recommending practice, observation, and consultation with a master.³⁶ Above all, the actor should know the words of his part perfectly and understand them and the character he is representing, in order to have the freedom to act.³⁷ Agricola (whose German translation of Tosi, with additions, appeared in 1757) also recommended the imitation of tragic actors and the study of French authors on acting—he even remarked that Senesino (the castrato) showed improvement after seeing a French acting troupe in Dresden.³⁸

Whereas the Italian sources are not overly specific regarding gestures and attitudes, they do agree in general with many of the French treatises concerning the essential role of facial expression, of feeling whatever emotion was being portrayed, and of maintaining naturalness. The French and French-influenced treatises, however, tended to be more specific and systematic regarding such elements of acting as eye expression, hand movement, and the coordination and timing of eyes, hands, and voice, as

³⁴Tosi, *Observations*, 70.

³⁵Mancini, *Practical Reflections*, 70.

³⁶Mancini, *Practical Reflections*, 76.

³⁷Mancini, *Practical Reflections*, 75-76.

³⁸Johann Friedrich Agricola, *Anleitung zur Singkunst* (Berlin, 1757), ed. Erwin R. Jacobi, with facsimile repr. of Tosi's original (Celle: Hermann Moeck Verlag, 1966), 217.

well as of specific poses and gestures.³⁹ Certain French writers, such as Le Cerf (1706), Rousseau (1768, and Garcin (1772), actually stress acting *over* singing:

la qualité la plus essentielle au chanteur de l'opéra, c'est d'être
bon acteur . . .⁴⁰

It is probably not surprising that certain singers of the time were indeed esteemed not only for their superior vocal technique and expression of the words but also for their skill in carrying out the action. Faustina Bordoni was one such case; she was vividly characterized by Quantz, for instance, who witnessed her performances in London in 1726-27. Quantz praised both the agility of her vocal execution, including ornaments, as well as the *passion and expression of her adagios*. And he added:

[She had] a clear and quick judgment in giving to words their full power and expression. In her action she was very happy; and as she perfectly possessed that flexibility of muscles and features, which constitutes face-playing, she succeeded equally well in furious, amorous, and tender parts: in short she was born for singing and acting.⁴¹

And among the castrati, Nicola Grimaldi, the famous "Nicolino," was praised for his excellent acting by the most diverse of critics. Even Addison and Steele, to say nothing of Galliard and later writers like Algarotti and Burney, revered his acting almost as much as his singing, or else they pointed to the happy combination of the two. In the words of Steele, he was:

an actor who, by the grace and propriety of his action and gestures, does honor to the human figure. Everyone will imagine I mean Signor Nicolini, who sets off the character he bears in an opera by

³⁹Some of the authors are Gildon, Grimarest, Lang, Jelgerhuis, Pickering, Cibber, and Le Brun. For an overview see Dene Barnett, "Die Schauspielkunst in der Oper des 18. Jahrhunderts," trans. Magda Marx-Weber in *Hamburger Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft* 3 (1978), 289-304.

⁴⁰Nicolas Etienne Framery, *De l'organization des spectacles de Paris* (1790), quoted in Barnett, 291.

⁴¹"Herrn Johann Joachim Quantzens Lebenslauf von ihm selbst entworfen," in Friedrich Wilhelm Marpur, *Historisch-kritische Beyträge zur Aufnahme der Musik*, i, 214, trans. Charles Burney, quoted in Winton Dean, "Bordoni, Faustina," *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, I, 547.

his action as much as he does the words by his voice . . .⁴²

Certain singers who excelled in acting specialized in a particular character type. Francesco Ballarino, a contralto castrato, was known for his dramatic recitative in the *fiero* style, i.e. in villainous roles,⁴³ Domenico Cecchi (Il Cortona) for the tender style of a lover, and Vittoria Tesi, contralto, for her male impersonations.⁴⁴ The latter was singled out for her acting ability by the French critic Goudar:

She gives expression to the music, and acts out the passions by letting what she feels herself pass into the soul of the spectator.⁴⁵

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Thus, we have seen no dearth of comments on operatic acting both in the earlier and later baroque periods. And what is particularly striking is the extent of agreement as to desirable criteria. Action was to be synchronized with the music, both in the details of gesture and in the general *affect*. Facial expression and other bodily movements were to be above all natural. In acting, as in music, the ideal of the Italian baroque was to achieve a high degree of communication through expressivity.

⁴²*The Tatler*, no. 115, cited by Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera* (London, 1956; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 125.

⁴³Tosi, *Observations*, 70.

⁴⁴Heriot, *Castrati*, 34.

⁴⁵Ange Goudar, *De Venise, remarques sur la musique et sur la danse* (Venice, 1773), 41.

**Caricature of the Italian contralto Vittoria Tesi (1700-1775)
by Anton Maria Zanetti.**

(Original in the Istituto di Storia d'Arte, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice.)

