

Pronunciatio in the Music of Purcell and Handel

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Classical rhetoric is of importance to singers. The Romans divided the subject into five parts. *Pronunciatio*, the last of these, covers all aspects of delivery. It is the territory of the voice teacher, and master of elocution, and, as *actio*, the home of the stage director and actor. *Elocutio*, the third part, is concerned with style and diction. It is the canon that contemporary rhetoricians are most interested in, and musicians should be as well. Of the early writers on rhetoric, Quintilian¹ wrote most on the subject of delivery. He invented rules to cover every conceivable aspect of performance, including gesture and attitude, proxemics, and the modulation and care of the voice. After him, the subject was frequently neglected by writers on rhetoric, presumably because it is better taught in the doing than in theory. Nonetheless, rhetorical delivery continued to be enthusiastically practised until very recently.

Nowadays, neither performing musician nor rhetorician pays much attention to *pronunciatio*. For the orator, taste forbids generous use of gesture, and sound amplification supplants voice modulation. Singers perform art song, one hand on the piano, the other employed in various attitudes of supplication, the face adapted to the demands of good voice production. The hands of choral soloists are usually occupied with music, and their faces devoted to making themselves heard. On stage, where gesture and flexible facial expression are always present, they are not systemized, but arise spontaneously from the effort to copy nature in order to convince the audience. The classical rhetorician studied the elements of *pronunciatio* to seek the timing, the gesture, the position of finger, hand, head, body, or foot, the facial expression, the position on stage, the voice modulation, and the speed of recitation best suited to each moment. As Goethe says,

The player must consider that he should not only imitate nature but also portray it ideally, thereby, in his presentation, uniting the true with the beautiful. (Goethe 1803, Rule 35)

Method acting and *pronunciatio* are not mutually exclusive, nor has the latter disappeared. Virtually all forms of dance and mime are bound to *pronunciatio*. Gestural stylization is also a part of the musical theatre, mostly for comic effect. Still, just as many violinists who are bred to unremitting vibrato find it difficult to eschew when playing a Bach Partita, actors choose the method most of the time. The results are sometimes unsatisfactory, for example in Racine or Corneille, and perhaps even more so when an actor in the lyric theatre uses

methods suited to *La Boheme* for an aria by Handel or Purcell.

The study of performance practice in acting is well underway. In the future we may distinguish between, for example, an acting style appropriate to Handel in comparison to Purcell just as we distinguish now between the performance practices that apply to their music. It is clear that before the second decade of this century, all acting technique was influenced by *pronunciatio*, probably most in the lyric theatre. The successful singers were those who perfected their skills as actors as well as musicians. Giambattista Mancini in his *Practical Reflections on Figured Singing*², published in Vienna in 1774 described many of the great virtuosi of his own and immediately preceding generations. Here is part of what he had to say about the castrato Giovanni Carestini,

He did not lack for acting ability, rather he studied it assiduously, not being personally content until he had mastered all its diverse styles so perfectly that he was worthy of fame for this alone. (Mancini 1774, p.9)

and of Vittoria Tesi Tramontini,

animated by her natural genius, she resolved to acquire with more tenacity the art of acting. She had the adaptability to distinguish one character from another as much through a change of facial expression as with appropriate gestures..

(Mancini 1774, p.9)

These are suggestive quotes. What does he mean by diverse styles; what are appropriate gestures? To answer these questions it turns out that descriptions of acting are not very helpful. On the other hand, tracts dealing with *pronunciatio* or gesture often are. The English writer John Bulwer³ published in 1644 an amazingly comprehensive survey of the gestures and hand signs in use in his day. He supplied drawings for almost all, and these, along with his descriptions, make clear how they were formed and used. What is most interesting about this source is that virtually all Bulwer's gestures and signs are still in use today, and, drawing mostly on historical references, he shows that they had been in use for a long time before him. The similarity of Bulwer's catalogue to modern gestural language is such that one is tempted to rely on instinct to gesture a spoken or sung speech and, no matter what gestures we choose, they almost certainly will not be anachronistic.

There are, however, difficulties with this approach. Bulwer was English and he left out gestures that we associate with other nationalities such as the Latin nations. The Italian gestures of insult are good examples. By Handel's day, actors cared about such distinctions. Here is Mancini discussing how a young singer should prepare himself as an actor,

It is sufficient if he know the virtue and predominant passions of a nation; he should know the common means of conversing, use of clothing, and such things in sum, which characterize and distinguish one nation from another (Mancini 1774, p.66)

A vowel shift in language may not change the meaning of words but it

would their sound. Might not an analogous shift change the look of gestures? Bulwer's as pictured do not appear just as we would make them today. Remember that whoever the artist was, he was not skilled. When we turn to great masters, especially such as Raphael, Carravagio, and Watteau, consummate draftsmen, we find the appearance of gesture unchanged.

It sometimes seems that the performance practice movement is driven by a desire to make the results different from the modern norm. Take singers approaches to vibrato: there are still early music specialists who persist in singing without it. Apart from the innateness of vibrato, still an open question, there is good evidence to show that some solo singers at the time of Purcell and Handel did employ continuous vibrato, and that it is not, therefore, unhistoric to do so today. As with vibrato, the operative question about gesture is how and where is it to be used? To answer this question there are excellent written sources, among the best being: Quintilian, Bulwer, Goethe, and Gilbert Austin⁴. The last three all refer back to Quintilian, and we should remember that, of these, all except Goethe wrote to instruct public speakers, and that he was unusually influenced by the ideals of classical rhetoric. It is easy to rely on these new-old sources, while ignoring writers such as John Hill, whose treatises on acting, 1750 and 1755, were aimed at the stage and whose instructions sound uncomfortably modern. He writes, for example, that, "to be exactly right in point of action on the stage, is to act exactly as the person represented would have done in the same circumstances⁵." However, art song and baroque opera are closer to oratory than to spoken drama, and the 18th century instructions for lyric actors read very like those given to public orators.

Austin's book, *Chironomia*, 1806, devoted to *pronunciatio* in general and most especially to gesture, is today the most widely consulted source in theatrical performance practice. It is aimed at pulpit oratory and its popularity as a source may derive from the quality of the many figures that he included. He also invented a notation for the gestures of oration. The amount, stylization, size, and complexity of the gesture will strike anyone who makes an attempt to work through his instructions. Quantz⁶ wrote similarly of music when he described how to perform an adagio. He went so far as to explain how each note of a small ornament is to be inflected. The impression left is that baroque performers were taught to pay minute attention to detail. Similarly, after reading Austin, we may surmise that most modern performances of baroque music, even those that purport to be historically informed, are significantly under gestured. Furthermore, as Austin's target was the pulpit, he bolsters the case for the use of gesture in church music. Its use in sacred music was a matter of debate in the eighteenth century. Once again, Mancini makes this clear,

I think that the recitatives for the church, the chamber, the theatre, ought all to be given in the same manner. But above all; even if the recitative be given with the necessary changes of voice, pauses and periods, it will always be languid and flaccid if it is not accompanied by a suitable action. (Mancini 1774, p.73)

He would always use gesture, regardless of the setting. Today we never do when performing either sacred or concert baroque music. Context is important; one hesitates to add much to the pietist music of Bach, but why not to most

cantatas or oratorios performed in concert halls? Passive stand-up-sit-down performances force the listener to concentrate on the music to the detriment of meaning. May we not say the same of performing art song? Goethe's 91 rules for actors were published in 1824 by which time Schubert had set many of his poems⁷. He would have wanted his poetry sung according to his ideas on action, especially a text such as the *Erkönig*? He was also one of the first to start a school to teach the principles of acting, a school to which he admitted singers. Not only the rules, more than half devoted to gesture and stage movement, but all his writings touching on the theatre, and the reminiscences of those who knew the Weimar theatre, leave no doubt as to Goethe's rhetorical approach.

Most of the descriptions of, and by, skilled actors mention command of facial expression as one of their chief graces. Clearly, spoken action often requires a separate awareness of gesture and facial expression. With sung action, it is likely that the facial expression will always and as far as possible follow the spirit of the music, coupled to convincing gestures. Amongst singing teachers from Giovanni Maffei in 1562 to Richard MacKenzie Bacon⁸ at the beginning of the 19th century, there is a common thread calling for moderation in facial expression and in the way the mouth is opened. Maffei's rules for singers include,

Hold a mirror before your eyes that you may become aware of any ugly expression you might make in singing, and that you should keep your mouth moderately open, no wider than when you are conversing with friends. (Maffei 1562 in MacLintock, p.45)

In 1606 Dowland translated Andreas Ornithoparcus thus,

The uncomely gaping of the mouth is a sign of a mad singer.
(Dowland 1606 in MacClintock, p.162)

Mancini had this to say,

Every singer should position his mouth as he positions it when he smiles naturally that is in such a way that the upper teeth be perpendicularly and moderately separated from those below. (Mancini 1774, p.30)

Dene Barnett, the leading contemporary expert on theatrical performance practice, argues that "the 18th century art of gesture used a vocabulary of basic gestures, each with an individual meaning known to all in advance⁹." This suggests the precision of sign language for the deaf, and the evidence that he presents is not very convincing that the audience read them in that way. The pictorial and descriptive evidence depicts gesture drawn from life. However, that it did sometimes take on specific rhetorical meaning can be shown by an occasional painting, which may be understood only in light of the rhetorical significance of the gesture depicted¹⁰. To make his argument, Barnett relies, in part, on the widespread knowledge of rhetoric during the 18th century, which was taught as the basis of education. That the educated audience knew and valued rhetoric is absolutely beyond question. Just as the principles of *pronunciatio* helped the actor both to imitate and to idealize nature, the canons of *elocutio* taught the writer to use scheme and trope to clarify and elevate, and the audience to appre-

ciate the subtleties of textual style. Today, most performances of baroque opera take little account of *pronunciatio* and even less of *elocutio*. This is a pity because we sometimes miss an element that is crucial to the full appreciation of a work of art. Handel and Purcell pursued their careers in a time that was a heyday of rhetoric and it is no coincidence that they are supreme masters of musical rhetoric. The poetry they chose tended towards the epic and highly stylized. It may seem unnatural and stiff, precisely because it is self-conscious and stylized, though hardly stiff in the hands of an understanding performer. Modern audiences and performers usually ignore text except to maintain the narrative thread.

The correct approach to *pronunciatio* serves to set the ethos for the *elocutio*. Furthermore, it clarifies meaning in sentences where clarity has been sacrificed to rhyme, metre or complex figure. It involves the audience with the words. It can, as a mnemonic, enhance our awareness of the formal structure of both music and text. Finally, it is an important part of the rhetorical beauty of the work, including the beauty of music, and the beauty of the human body. While modern performers are mostly contemptuous of rhetoric, for Purcell's and Handel's audiences it was probably the first line of contact with most works of art.

Take Purcell's song *Mad Bess*¹¹. His audience would have recognized the *Euphuistic* style of the first verse, including the parallel phrases, the repeated patterns with single words, the antithesis, the classical references, the natural history, and the lovely, controlled word sound. They would have appreciated the flawless musical rhetoric that serves as a vehicle for the poetic devices and sets off the natural rhythm of the words. Finally, they would have taken pleasure in the gesture, which served to clarify and enrich the whole.

Some works such as Handel's *Susanna* can be understood only when the formal rhetoric of the text is taken into account. Along with the *Merchant of Venice*, which it very much resembles, *Susanna* is the nearest thing to a courtroom drama before Perry Mason. As such, in addition to the usual literary devices, it is full of calculated forensic rhetoric, and the verses of *Susanna* are saturated with rhetorical schemes, and tropes. Is all this merely superfluous ornamentation? Perhaps today it is, but in Handel's time, along with an informed audience and a rhetorical performance style that enhanced comprehension, there were several other factors, which helped the public to savour the details of the text. Pepys, for example, shows us that playgoers habitually attended multiple performances of the same theatre piece and that many will have purchased a copy of librettos.

Ours is a distracted age. Too often in a performance of a work such as *Susanna*, the bulk of the public becomes the passive receptor of vague musical elements, and for it the three or more hours allotted stretch out interminably. Few have the time to sort out the rhetoric of *Susanna*. Still, all those involved in a performance should. It is the rhetoric that reveals the masterpiece, and if we take the trouble to establish the correct ethos we may draw the audience into something like a complete appreciation of the art form.

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Endnotes

¹ Marcus Fabius Quintilianus. *Institutio Oratoria Bk XI*. Trans. H.E. Butler (London & Cambridge, Mass. : Loeb Classical Library, 1959-1963)

² Giambattista Mancini. *Pensieri e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato*. Vienna 1774. Translated and edited by E. Foreman [*Practical Reflections on Figured Singing*]. Champaign, IL: Pro Musica Press, 1968

³ John Bulwer. *Chirologia: or the Naturall Language of the Hand*. Whereupon is added *Chironomia: or the Art of Manual Rhetorick*. London, 1644. (reprint Carbondale: Southern University Press, 1974)

⁴ Gilbert Austin. *Chironomia or a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery*. London, 1806. (Reprint. Carbondale: Southern University Press, 1966)

⁵ John Hill. *The Actor, or a Treatise on the Art of Playing*. London, 1755. (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1972) p.227

⁶ Johan Joachim Quantz. *On playing the Flute*. Berlin, 1972. Trans. Edward R. Reilly. (New York: Schirmer Books 1966) Chapter 14: Of the manner of playing the adagio

⁷ Goethe's rules were formulated in 1803.

⁸ Richard MacKenzie Bacon. *The Elements of Vocal Science*. London, 1824 (Reprint. Champaign, Il: Pro Musica Press, 1966.)

⁹ Dene Barnett. *The Art of Gesture: The Practices and Principles of 18th Century Acting*. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1987) p.8 see also p.10, p.18

¹⁰ A good example is the gesture of the central male figure in Antoine Watteau's (1684-1721) painting *Le Panneau de Gersaint*. Berlin, Charlottenburg Castle. If it is given its rhetorical interpretation that indicates either offering or begging for money, then the narrative of the painting is clarified.

¹¹ *Henry Purcell. The Works of Henry Purcell vol. 25, pp.26-30*
