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The reflections of memory : an account of a cognitive approach to historically informed staging

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Conclusion

It may be perceived as a truism to affirm that opera is a complex form of art that needs the conjunction of many layers of expression to fulfill its aesthetical ambition. Nonetheless this reality was at the center of the original conception of opera in the seventeenth century, and it would be an error to forget it when trying to create a Historically Informed staging for its performance. The diversity of its components, the simultaneity in which these expressions need to exist, and the resources required to achieve the substance of the product render opera a particular artistic occurrence. Furthermore, the ephemerality of this phenomenon makes opera an uneasy form for observation and memory: even a video recording of an opera is a woefully inadequate counterpart to the live performance it records. These variable space/time combinations reduce any attempt to analyze, practice or even write about opera, to a problematic task, but marks also the unique richness of this artistic genre. Such a singularity deserves a specific approach and this dissertation is an attempt to fulfill a clear need. Based on these prolegomena and nourished by experience, my research for a more in-depth and hands-on approach to the idea of Historically Informed staging of early opera is based on three main points: an as-thorough-as-possible exploration of the sources, the informed decision-making process which derives from it and the conscious use of knowledge for creative purpose are the elements of this approach. Each of these, necessarily, is faced by some limitations.

In this dissertation, I have tried to show how the specific links I created between historical documents known to me as an artist nourished my opera productions. In putting these interactions into words, I have sometimes taken what could be considered a sociological approach of describing the operatic work as the specific product of a cultural environment. I have also sometimes used a psychological style in the sense of describing the personality and intellectual environment of a composer or/and a librettist. In other places I have used a rhetorical device common during the period studied to structure my investigations. At all times, I have shown that each opera of the considered period and country has been another attempt to redefine the genre, using what was done before its first performance. Thereby new creative paths were proposed, from which I conclude that during the seventeenth century the genre opera is in perpetual transition, and an art which, while reproducing itself, changes as it develops, and that each piece asks for its own method of investigation and staging.

The notion of making an as-thorough-as-possible exploration of the sources is presented at length in this dissertation, being one result of my artistic research, the live productions being the core of it. In this way my research hopes to provide a new perspective on the first key period of European opera: it certainly demonstrates how the narratives present in the libretto and score of an opera cannot be dissociated from the layers of historical elements of its first performance in order not to damage its substance, its “raison d’être.” Everything written in these chapters, and in the case studies which follow them, was first revealed and

further elaborated with a special performance in mind and nourished all others thereafter. This is particularly relevant in the illustrated chapters where all illustrations are a selection, curated by my relation to the piece; what makes it even more personal is the fact that many of these visual remains can be found in my private collection. In short, what characterizes this investigation is mostly the multifaceted relationship it establishes between subjectivity and objectivity. This dissertation mirrors also that aspect of the research.

The method of experimentation that I presented in my introduction, with its relational sequence of various parts (*Remaining*, *Missing*, *Structural*, and *Performing*), has been tested in practice and proven to be fruitful. First, having in mind the notion of an as-thorough-as-possible exploration of the sources, I have shown in this study that literary analysis, archival study and material culture examination can reinforce and enrich one another and create a new understanding of operas (*Remaining parts*). The search of the unknown (*Missing parts*) was done by joining a breadth of social and political as well as artistic issues; the syncretism of these various stratas built in a construct (*Structural parts*), which in turn is alimanted by synthesizing in the performance a wide range of both familiar and unfamiliar material (*Performing parts*). This material consists of often dismissed remains and practices belonging to the performing arts, but my way of cognitive research creates in this case not only an inventory, or an index, but reveals a grammar or even a syntax.

For the question of the staging of opera per se, I also developed the notion of cultural contextualization and, by extending it to societal elements, this research aims to offer new ways, both musicological and literary, while still considering opera as a live spectacle. In turn, my practical experiences had shed new light on the selected operatic titles and, by testing some hypotheses formulated during the research process, I was able to identify, among other relevant factors, librettists, places and purposes of performance and, for some, even discover the political agenda at the time. In addition, in all the cases examined in this research, the process leading to performances revealed more meanings than first anticipated on paper, which shows that an opera, as art form, can be only fully disclosed with its performance as an objective and an outcome.

None of the chapters about specific opera titles pretend to cover everything to be found in historical sources and to be researched about the staging of the operas in question. In fact, what I aim to achieve in these chapters is to show how the interpretive process has de facto been operating as a selection of historical data in the memory, mine and that of others. In this process, not all this historical information appeared relevant at first: some data triggered imagination and creation, some only triggered new questions, leading to the search for new data. The process of historical research started conjointly with the plan to give a live performance to the piece and this objective has been the main criterion for the selection of facts; and, in doing so I created a « mémoire », a memory of the piece. The discoveries, even the hypotheses which came from them during this process, have all found a way in the final spectacles, if not by themselves, then at least by working as a constructive factor to produce an alternative expression. These notions must face three outside-the-artist limitations, which constantly interact with each other during the process: the limitations of time and of budget,

and the inherent personal limitations of the acting agents, as the collaborative nature of producing an opera does not always provide the optimal conditions for a serene work.

There first is a limitation of time because one cannot research, or rehearse, a piece's history forever, even though there is always more to discover. Between what can be planned and what cannot, time is of the essence: elaboration of a project, choice of title, phase of historical research, gestation, time of elaboration of the visual components of the production, design process, duration of rehearsals, etc., are as many moments of the creative process, when the stage director must establish a dialogue with external inputs in a specific time frame. The established belief that the stage director only acts in the rehearsal studio is a misconception. Having a performance in preparation means that the reality of the resources at my disposal, including factual (the size of performing space combined with the number of performers), financial (budgets are not unlimited) and human (the choice of partners is never unrestricted), all influence the possible use and therefore relevance of historical facts discovered during the theoretical research.

Second, the informed decision-making process which derives from the gathering of historical information is experienced by me as an expressive process. Nevertheless, as informed as it wishes to be, this decision process must fit in the current economic format of opera business. Factual and financial means are by themselves influenced by the societal conditions of the pacing of the project's preparation: if it ever was, the original economic model of the creation of an opera is no longer valid. The current economic model is unstable, and its effects are obvious on production factors: budgets fluctuate constantly. Nowadays, the conditions are not necessarily suitable to the historically informed production of opera. When creating a production of an early opera, not everything, even if perfectly historically accurate, is always possible because of the limitations of the budget. On the other hand, trying to recreate what may appear to us as the ideal conditions of its birth is already a fantasy because it is built on the myth of the perfect suitability and aptness between all expressive elements of opera (poetry, music, painting, and by extension, visual arts) and performing forces (and by performing forces, I do not mean exclusively performers but all personal attached to the making of an opera). This ultimate appropriateness seems to me a utopia comparable to the idea of a golden age. But because this idea was around when opera was created in the seventeenth century and has since remained a fundamental element of its monstrous identity as an artistic genre, it is appropriate for me to include it in any concept of staging direction.

As important as the budget are the human resources which define to a great extent the results: producers, designers and technicians all have an influence on the process, mostly because they present what always appears to be a series of personal limitations. The collaborative nature of producing an opera does not always give the optimal conditions for a cohesive work: the difference in appreciation of the historical information between performers is a prime source of limitations. Because they have not shared all the steps of the investigation, the relevance of historical information is not always clear to all of them in the same way. The utopia mentioned above is not the same for everyone, and a great amount of communication is needed between all acting agents in order to make them project co-owners. The historian's library, the designer's atelier, the performer's studio: these are very different spaces where

interactions with the historical information are dealt with at different levels. The virtual laboratory which establishes itself between all these locations should ideally be energized by the stage director and the musical director and should eventually flourish in the performing space.

Third, inside the frame dictated by these limitations, the conscious use of knowledge for creative purpose is the most difficult to circumscribe. Because of the nature of the treated object, an opera, any further attempt to describe this creative process theoretically is deemed to establish itself in an academic context which today is mostly under the auspices of musicology. Also, another established belief among the early music community is that research should preexist creative process: however, my experience as a stage director contradicts this assumption. The Historically Informed staging of an opera cannot be compared to a “painting by numbers” method, where an objective and informed reading of a libretto and a score, and academic evidences, would give birth to the true and full expression of the opera in question. This candid way to look at it is mostly due to scholars who do not practice opera and have no awareness of the series of limitations any opera stage director must overcome again and again for any performance. The concomitance of historical research and creative expression is in fact one the most thrilling parts of my interpretive process: every finding of Historical Information orients the artistic work in a more defined direction while all artistic decisions which need to be taken during the production process trigger more questions which, in turn, call for additional research. In these aleatory findings the moments of serendipity are not to be neglected, leading either to a validation or to an alternative solution to a problem.

Most of my findings in this “opera memory” ultimately had a presence in the staging of the pieces I studied: the living performance absorbed them and diffused them again, by reinvigorated reflections. Although the work of the stage director influences all aspects of the performance, the singers are the active embodiment of these reflections and as a consequence constitute for me the most essential part of any opera process and product. During a performance, singers are asked to deal with two forms of consciousness: first they have to be fully involved in the act of performing, their actual physical expression being the key of the live performance. They are given the responsibility of expressing the significance of the piece. But second, they should embody the “spirit of the period” by relating on a cognitive level with as much Historical Information as possible. My work as a stage director oscillates between these two: I aim to give singers a new awareness of their physical capacity of expressions, but I load them with period information relevant to their characters. The physical act of singing demands the full involvement of the body, but the psychological act of interpreting requires a total focus of the mind. Although singers themselves choose what is relevant in my discourse to their character, they must have an awareness that they need to establish a dialogue of concepts between them. A coherent ensemble (of singers) must appear ultimately as the vector of various meanings. Based on his interpretation of the historical sources, this singular force of expressions is the creation of the stage director.

The creative purpose of the stage director is accomplished through a substantial number of elements: he must first give an interpretation of the libretto informed by the score, leading to an interpretation for which he has to oversee the expressive functionality of stage

crafts and arts. A stage director's second task is to give a performance relevance today, for him and for the audience and in a way the stage director is the first perceiver and receiver, as he must be aware of the diverse expectations of an audience: hence my focus as a stage director on interpretive research. My dissertation exposes as many paths of research about the relations between poetry, music and visual arts as it gives new perspectives for (re)activating them in a performance, allowing each member of the audience to build his own experience by choosing what to look at, and in which order, importance, proportion, and so on. These elements, which have been tested through experimentation, and are all related to the idea of the shared necessity between all mediums involved, are part of my reflections. Although this dissertation seems to deal with the domain of ideas and historical facts and, as said above, presents only a part of my work, all these ideas are also encapsulated in the final artistic product, but only after they went through the process of emotional testing. This testing period happens both intuitively and is influenced by my artistic partners: during the designing phase with designers and during the rehearsal process with the musical director(s) and the singers. The question of how these artistic selves are then working, or functioning, is not easy to circumscribe. In my own experience, it is the self, as the object of an individual person and his or her own reflective consciousness, which is at the center of my cognitive search.

My research about the staging of baroque operas is intended as a specific contribution to the history of the Historically Informed practice movement. That it is possible to give this rich repertoire a relevance for today's audience resides first in my conviction that the performing artists of the past did not know better but certainly at least as much as we do, and if they were different in the solutions they proposed, we are at least well advised to relate directly to their questions. Baroque opera production may highlight the fallibility of definite norms and raise questions about various authenticities rather than attempting to supply answers and create a kind of orthodoxy. I believed that baroque operas were only conceived for and as performance, and my research has reaffirmed this opinion. However, the common exploration which happens during the performance should allow the spectators of today to reach their own individual understanding and appreciation of opera. Numerous occurrences in the seventeenth-century cases that I studied have repeatedly shown that a new operatic piece must acknowledge and at the same time break the artistic mold it came from. A staging, because of its function as a regulator of the ephemeral parts of the performance, offers the best opportunity to present works afresh. However, this can only be achieved through the two in-depth processes of investigation/selection and collaboration/decision-making. It is clear that today's social, economic and cultural states of affairs, including academic, rarely guarantee the necessary means for such an enterprise in the reality of financial, human and time constraints. From this I conclude that Historically Informed staging of the opera of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is not an easily defined practice but a utopia and, as such, can only be an exponential and experimental tool for creative purposes.