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

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***The Reflections of Memory* Summary**

This dissertation documents the author's research into the Historically Informed Performance of operas from the seventeenth century and early eighteenth century.

In the introduction the author argues that opera is not only a musical genre but a combinative form which can only achieve its full identity during a staged performance. The notion of Historically Informed Performance should be a concept linked with music as much as with theatre. For this purpose, although reaffirming that the stage director must overview the expressive functionalities of opera crafts and arts, the author balances the notion of authenticity of parts with the more dynamic notion of authenticities in the relationships between parts. He also re-examines the pejorative but commonly held notion that Historically Informed Productions of opera are essentially made of objects and forms, whose capacity of reproductions of period original signals a style. He then nullifies this notion by introducing his process of interpretation as an articulation between the *Remaining parts* (score, libretto, but also stage designs and testimonies of various nature) and the *Missing parts* (the elements which cannot be traced because lost or immaterial in nature) within the frame constructed by the *Structural parts* (the conceptions of opera and art at the period) and the *Performing parts* (the ways of expression the stage had then at its disposal: sets, costumes, lights, movements, etc). The author aims to demonstrate that: A: opera is a combinative art whose potential of expression can only be fully achieved through the deciphering of various codes interrelated with each other during a performance, and B: that these identifications and articulations enable a transfer which allows the re-creation of an opera. This creative process is called by the author: *The Reflections of Memory*. This expression embodies the author's search for the artistic relevance of an opera.

Through twelve operas of the seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, which all have been staged for the Boston Early Music Festival, Chapters 1 to 6 trace a chronological exploration of baroque opera and reveal some principles the author's attitude towards staging is based upon, by placing *Remaining parts* within the frame defined by *Structural parts* to identify *Missing parts*, and establish *Performing parts*.

Chapter 1 examines the notions of space in early Italian opera: through three of the works of Monteverdi it shows the experimental capacity of the genre at its early development and confirms the importance of scenography in the Venetian conception of opera, which still predominates today. Two methods of investigations are applied: one based on a contextual study of *Orfeo* (1607), the other on an investigation of new visual sources for *Ulisse* (1641) and *Poppea* (1643). The author comes to the unexpected conclusions that: A. *Orfeo* was an experimental enterprise close to a collective modello, a form susceptible of further adjustments, and: B. if the pictorial sceneries are integral part of the Venetian opera, a HIP performance of *Poppea* could happen without any sets.

In Chapter 2 the author's aim is to expand current thinking about the beginnings of French Opera: he categorizes the final ballet of *Psyché* (1671) as a poetic structure presenting what would become the French style of operas Quinault subsequently developed with Lully.

In Chapter 3 the author identifies the work of Charpentier as an alternative voice during this absolutist period in French music history (1672 - 1687). The investigation leads him to attribute three of Charpentier's « petits operas », *Les Plaisirs de Versailles* (1683), *La Couronne de Fleurs* (1685) and *La Descente d'Orphée aux Enfers* (1687), to three known poets and by doing so he expands the scope of their hypothetical first performances which helps in turn to re-define their original performing form.

In Chapter 4 the author turns to England and revisits two notorious « masque/operas»: Blow's *Venus and Adonis* (1683) is reexamined under its ekphratic capacity while the picture of the Augustan context of Handel's *Acis and Galatea* (1718) gives the key to its purpose and function as establishing a « genius loci ».

Chapter 5 explores the influence of Italian and French systems elsewhere in Europe. By focusing on Munich and examining in detail the allegorical meanings of *Niobe, Regina di Tebe* (1688) by Steffani, the author demonstrates the double importance of Jesuit influence and military propaganda on opera in Bavaria.

Chapter 6 examines what the author identifies as a « diplomatic opera »: *Le Carnaval de Venise* (1699) by Campora. He shows that this opera ballet, taking advantage of the diplomatic circumstances, is an attempt to create a new genre, which claims with determination the right for its kaleidoscopic nature to exist next to Quinault's lasting system.

After these chapters dedicated to the investigation, dramaturgy and staging of specific pieces, three case-studies offer a complement to the method for costumes, sets, and machines. The first one explores the iconological process the figure of the river god goes through to become an opera character easily identifiable thanks to his costume.

The second case-study recreates the order of sets and machines in which *Psiché* was performed in Drottningholms Slottsteater in 1766.

A third case-study, dedicated to the staging of *Niobe, Regina di Tebe*, offers the technical list of flying effects in a production recently staged by the author.

A Conclusion offers some short remarks where the author states that if *The Reflections of Memory* wants to offer a method for investigating baroque operas from the point of view of their first performances it is also the description of an attitude towards historical sources and a creative path for productions of today. Consequently, the author concludes that Historically Informed staging can only be an exponential and experimental attempt for creative purposes and is not an easily defined practice.