Renewing historical performance through an embodiment of historical acting techniques

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Renewing Historical Performance through an Embodiment of Historical Acting Techniques

Jed Wentz

I had, about half a year ago, an odd experience, one that served as a starting point for the reflections that I present to you today.[1] I heard, on the radio, a recording I had conducted in 2001 of an oratorio entitled *Joseph* by the Dutch composer Willem de Fesch.

A friend of mine alerted me to the broadcast: "you're on the radio," he texted. Now, I am not someone who listens to their own recordings with any regularity; indeed, I do not even own a complete set of my own CDs. I doubt that I had heard even a note of *Joseph* since 2001. Listening to it again was a challenging experience, for while I heard some things in it that I enjoyed, that sounded fresh to me and that still communicated something, I was astounded at how often I heard my younger self struggling—and failing—to escape from the prevailing musical *Zeitgeist*, from the conception of Baroque performance practice I had largely taken on from my teachers and which at that time I heard all around me in the performances of my most esteemed colleagues and friends. I had wanted not to discard entirely but merely sometimes to break these "rules"—for instance, by employing various means that were frowned upon by my peers as excessive at the time, such as prioritizing certain musical gestures, changing tempo, or encouraging expressive timing and timbres in voices and instruments. In listening to the radio broadcast of my old recording, I was appalled at how frequently my attempts had missed the mark. I recalled that indeed I had had a certain dissatisfaction

[1] The following text preserves the oratorical style and structure of the original lecture that I delivered at the conference *Early Music in the 21st Century* on October 16, 2021. For audio materials related to this text see the accompanying website.

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with my work on *Joseph* at the time, a dissatisfaction paired with an obstinate determination—an artistic imperative!—to search for something more in terms of expression than I felt the spirit of the times allowed me. And so the recording, at a distance of twenty years, stood and stands for me as a monument to frustration and failure.

Thus began the process of reflection that has led to this chapter. I realize *now*—after having spent the last fifteen years exploring the relationship between declamation and music in the long eighteenth century—that I *then* could not get where I wanted to be musically because I did not have the proper materials in my imagination. Before continuing, I must confess that the bedrock on which my reasoning is founded here is a belief that may not be universally shared: fundamental to my argument is the idea that we only create from our memories—more specifically, that we create new musical performances using sound-materials stored in our memory. Of course, I admit that an unexpected combination of specific memories can produce something in art that seems to spring like Athena from the forehead of its creator; but I do not believe that anything can be imagined without recourse to memory. Early musicians, in my view, do not create their performances purely from historical theories, but rather by reconfiguring memories of how the application of those theories has sounded in practice. This, it seems to me, is why my performance of *Joseph* had failed. At the time the recording was made I had had a language of early music inflections in my memory that had been placed there years before with loving care by my teachers and had thereafter been reinforced by the many recordings and concerts I had heard. To these had been added those of the "modern" performance practice I had learned even earlier in my studies, while preparing myself for orchestral auditions on the "modern" flute. To these memories were added the wonderfully strange musical freedoms I heard—and relished—on the early twentieth-century recordings I listened to with great regularity from 1979 onward. Of course, I further remembered the sound of my own attempts to make a synthesis of all these influences in performance; that is to say I had memories of both those performances I deemed had been successful and those that I felt were not. It was from the conglomeration of all of these various remembered sounds that I drew my timing, my nuances, my sense of appropriate musical energy levels—in short, my musical expression—while recording *Joseph*, because these were the sounds that filled my musical storehouse at that time. Alas, neither the old-fashioned, fuzzy poetry of the much-loved historical recordings—so much more effective, I felt, in Romantic repertoire than in Baroque—nor the lucid, objective, contemporaneous musical solutions of late twentieth-century historically informed performance (HIP) offered appropriate possibilities for the expression I sought: the expression I was looking for but could not imagine, and therefore could not find.

Here, then, is the reason for my discontent not only with *Joseph*, but also in general with many of my performances. I realized, even at the time, that different expressive devices were needed, but I had no idea where to look for them while remaining true to my HIP convictions. *I could not get there from where I then was*. If, however, none of the sound-memories available to a modern performer of early music could help me to be more expressive in a manner that I found fully convincing, what was I to do? I disdained the idea, to which a number of my colleagues turned, of mixing genres. Bach and jazz, Telemann and "folk," seemed ephemeral and ineffectual in terms of bringing Early Music forward. It seemed to me that such one-off efforts, no matter how seductive the artistic results might be, could not help me to develop my practice, particularly as the notions of historical authenticity and unevolving traditions on which they were often based were highly suspect to me. I felt trapped.

It was while working on my doctorate that I began to see a potential solution in historical acting techniques. My topic was the relationship between acting and musical timing at the Paris opera in the eighteenth century. Through my practice-based research I came to believe that because the actor's craft of the past was intensely musical, learning to express words with one's voice and gesture in a historically inspired manner can enrich one's aural memories while prioritizing the kinesthetic authenticity of the performer's body. This in turn can help to develop a truly individual expression.

It will be easier to make myself understood if I first describe what I mean by historical acting. Of course, the term is broad enough to include a much larger range of dates, but for my work I use it to encompass things histrionic[2] from the early tragedies of Jean Racine to the advent of sound film: not to put too fine a point on it, let's say from 1680 to 1930. Within this period, which I believe embraces a fairly unified dramatic tradition, I do, however, look for nuances related to changing styles of playwriting and acting.[3] I also prioritize

[2] I use the word in its older, neutral sense: pertaining to acting.

[3] I would, for instance, be wary of using a source from 1930 for a performance of a piece from the eighteenth century without first subjecting it to scrutiny using the appropriate historical sources.

the traditions of *spoken* theater and am not initially concerned with singing or opera.

However, this does not mean that my training and experience as a musician are not important to this research: it is precisely because historical declamatory practices were closely tied to musical performance that the study of declamation has the greatest potential to revitalize our current performance practice for early music. Historically, the declamatory voice was trained using musical concepts such as pitch, timbre, and tempo.[4] Even expressive markings and terminology like ritardando and crescendo were sometimes used. Within the confines of this chapter a few diverse examples will have to stand for the richness of the sources concerning the relationship between music and speech.

Let us begin with a quotation from an eighteenth-century musical authority. Johann Joachim Quantz (1697–1773) underscored the importance of the relationship between oratory and musical performance in several passages of his *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* of 1752. Take, for example, the following, oft-quoted passage:

> Musical performance can be compared to the performance of an orator. An orator and a musician have the same intent, in regard not only to the elaboration of the things to be presented, but also the presentation itself, namely: to master the hearts, to excite or quiet the passions, and to transport the listeners now to this, now to that affect. It is an advantage to both if one has some knowledge of the duties of the other.[5]

Quantz insists that shared goals unite the speaker and musician, in terms of both composition and performance, and they can learn from each other's practices. The requirements that he associates with an orator in terms of performance are a loud, bright, and pure voice; a clear pronunciation; a pleasing vocal variety including changes of speed, accentuation, and dynamics; and a

[4] See Jed Wentz, "An Annotated Livret of Lully's Roland as a Source for Seventeenth-Century Declamation," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 25, no. 1 (March 2013): 1–36.

[5] "Der musikalische Vortrag kann mit dem Vortrage eines Redners verglichen werden. Ein Redner und ein Musikus haben sowohl in Ansehung der Ausarbeitung der vorzutragenden Sachen, als des Vortrages selbst, einerley Absicht zum Grunde, nâmlich: sich der Herzen zu bemeistern, die Leidenschaften zu erregen oder zu stillen, und die Zuhörer bald in diesen, bald in jenen Affect zu versetzen. Es is vor beyde ein Vortheil, wenn einer von den Pflichten des andern einige Erkenntniß hat." (All English translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.)Johann Joachim Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (Johann Friedrich Voß: Berlin, 1752), 100.

use of voice that is specific to each intended affect, which I take to mean individual *timbres*.[6] All of these easily can be related to a musical practice.

We can find an interesting confirmation of Quantz's assertion that the orator and musician must understand each other's craft in the works of the late eighteenth-century English elocutionist John Walker (1732–1807), who wrote in his highly influential *Elements of Elocution*:

> [. . .] musick has power over the mind, and can dispose it alternately to joy, or sorrow; to pity, or revenge. When the voice, therefore, assumes the tone which a musician would produce in order to express a certain passion or sentiment in a song, the speaker, like the performer on a musical instrument, is wrought upon by the sound he creates; and though active at the beginning, at length becomes passive, by the sound of his own voice on himself.[7]

Here Walker advises the orator to imitate the musician, rather than the other way around. He insists that the musical sound of the actor's voice will deepen the expressed affect as it works on the ever more passive body and mind. Walker continues by advising the speaker to study the vocal tones associated with the expressions of the passions, because study can come to the aid of spontaneity in performance:

> Hence it is, that though we frequently begin to read or speak, without feeling any of the passion we wish to express, we often end in full possession of it. This may serve to show the necessity of studying and imitating those tones, looks and gestures, that accompany the passions, that we may dispose ourselves to feel them mechanically, and improve our expression of them when we feel them spontaneously; for by the imitation of the passion, we meet it, as it were, half way.[8]

Here we see not only musical expression inspiring impassioned speech but also an injunction to mechanical practice of those tones and gestures (that is to say, the tools of the actor most closely related to music)[9] characteristic of

[6] For Quantz's remarks on the voice see Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung*, 101.
[7] John Walker, *The Elements of Elocution* (Printed for the Author: London, 1781), Vol. 2, 280.
[8] Walker, *The Elements of Elocution*, 280.
[9] For a discussion of the mind-body relationship from the perspective of artistic research see Jed Wentz, "A Roundtable on Embodiment in Research," in *Historical Acting Techniques and the 21st-Century Body*, ed. Jed Wentz, special issue, *European Drama and Performance Studies*, 2022-2, no. 19: 75–91.

specific affective states. However, there is yet another way: if musical tones can awaken affect in the speaker, affect can also naturally produce tones in speech that then can be heightened in performance. A slightly earlier eighteenth-century source, *The History of the English Stage*, published in 1741, contains the following anecdote about the training of the famous London actress Elizabeth Barry (d. 1713) by her patron, John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester (1647–1680):

> It was certain Mrs. Barry was Mistress of a very good Understanding, yet she having little, or no Ear for Music, which caused her to be thought dull when she was taught by the Actors, because she could not readily catch the Manner of their sounding Words, but ran into a Tone, the Fault of most young Players; this Defect my Lord perceiving, he made her enter into the Nature of each Sentiment; perfectly changing herself, as it were, into the Person, not merely by the Stress or Sounding of the Voice, but feeling really, and being in the Humour, the Person she represented, was supposed to be in.[10]

Here imagination, emotional and physical feeling, the embodiment of the passions—and above all, *imagination*—replace a musical ear, bringing a natural expression to the actress's voice. Indeed, according to the anecdote, Rochester's skill in distinguishing the affects made it possible for Barry to make use of "heightening Strokes" of passion to great effect, apparently leading the actress out of her passionless monotony to a more musical delivery:

> As no Age ever produced a Person better skilled in the various Passions and Foibles of Mankind than my Lord *Rochester*, so none was more capable of instructing her to give those heightening Strokes which surprised and delighted all who saw her.[11]

I feel that such passages justify my attempts to increase my musical expression through historically inspired, musically informed, and, at the same time, deeply felt declamation. This involves, on my part, crafting and carrying out

[10] Thomas Betterton [Edmund Curll & William Oldys?], *The History of the English Stage* (E. Curll: London, 1741), 16.
[11] Betterton [Edmund Curll & William Oldys?], *The History of the English Stage*, 16.

specific performative research projects involving historical acting sources in order to achieve affective kinesthetic states. These can be called upon later, in performance, to help me to meet the passion, "as it were, half way."

A recent and very fruitful project of mine in this regard has been to train my voice and imagination using a nineteenth-century manual by the Anglo-American actor George Vandenhoff (1820–1885). His *The Art of Elocution* (a work that went through numerous editions between 1846 and 1867) not only contains many vocal exercises concerning pitch, tempo, and timbre (see Figure 2.1) but also brings all the Quantzian duties of the orator together in a musically marked-up version of William Collin's poem *The Passions*.

Figure 2.2 shows the section of the poem portraying revenge and pity, two of the emotions mentioned by Walker in suggesting orators imitate musicians. One can see the many musical annotations indicating tempo, dynamic, and articulation. The letters printed at the beginning of the lines in blackletter type indicate pitch levels.[12]

Not only did my engagement with Vandenhoff's annotations refine my performance skills in nineteenth-century declamation, it also filled my imagination with the sound of my own voice expressing a passion in a musical manner. It thus increased the contents of my musical imagination from which I can draw in future performances, both as an actor and as a musician. Such engagements point toward the possibility of a radically different direction in conservatory training, for it is a relatively easy step from the personal experience of the *feeling* of historical acting techniques in one's own body to the development of teaching strategies based on these techniques. Indeed, the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague is currently running a number of classes aimed at expanding the performance possibilities of instrumentalists and singers, based on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rhetorical and theatrical sources.[13]

In closing, I would like to remark upon how my engagement, since 2005, with historical acting sources has gradually altered my perspective on the discipline of early music and its future.

[12] Although Vandenhoff's example brings us to the mid-nineteenth century, a close reading of his work reveals just how indebted he was to eighteenth-century tradition, including the works of John Walker: compare, for instance, Vandenhoff's annotated version of "Portia's Speech" from *The Merchant of Venice* to Walker's.

[13] For example, the 2023 curriculum of the Royal Conservatoire of the Hague contains a course entitled Rhetorical Acting for Musicians: Historical Acting Techniques to Create Persuasive Performances. Under the guidance of historical actors João Luís Paixão, Laila Cathleen Neuman, and João Carlos Santos, students will create both "spoken and musical performances with the intent of engaging the audience's emotions and [their] own in a persuasive manner."

DYNAMICS, OR POWERS OF SOUND.

Term.	Sign.	Explanation.	How, or for what to be used.
piano . . .	*p.*	softly	With a soft tone, expressive of calmness, gentleness, mildness, &c.
pianissimo .	*pp.*	*very* softly . .	*increased* expression of tenderness, &c.
forte . . .	*f.*	loud	the reverse of the above ; a loud, powerful tone.
mezzo forte	*m. f.*	rather loud.	
fortissimo .	*ff.*	*very* loud . . .	*increased* expression.
crescendo .	<	increasing . .	swelling the volume of voice.
diminuendo	>	diminishing. .	reducing the volume.
forzando .	*fz.*	bursting. . . .	explosive, with a burst of sound.
staccato .	' ' '	beating	with short and distinct strokes of sound; to be used in rapid and energetic delivery.
legato . . (the reverse of *staccato.*)	*leg.*	connected or smoothly . .	a smooth, even flow of tone, proper for the delivery of unimpassioned verse.

The following terms denote the character of the *expression* proper to any passage :—

affetuoso . . (*affo.*)-with *emotion* : expressive of deep feeling.

dolce. . . . (*dol.*)-*sweetly* : expressive of *tenderness*, *affection*, *pity*, &c.

maestoso . . . . . . with a grand, *majestic* expression, proper to solemn feeling.

con spirito (*con sp.*)-with spirit ; for *lively* expression.

con fuoco (*con fu.*)-with *fire* ; in an animated, energetic manner.

con anima (*con an.*)-with *soul*; that is, with a *thrilling* expression of intense feeling.

Figure 2.1 A list of musical terms for oratorical expression from George Vandenhoff's *The Art of Elocution* (1846).

My first remark is that it has shifted my conception of the starting point for performative decisions away from the *aesthetic* and toward the *kinesthetic*, or perhaps better said, from the intellectual to the muscular. Classical music training, HIP and otherwise, currently emphasizes the production of sound over the generation of feeling. Musicians, in my experience, all too

THE PASSIONS—AN ODE.—COLLINS.

INTRODUCTION OR PRELUDE.

DIRECTIONS.

Begin calmly, smoothly, and in moderate time, and middle pitch.

When Music, heavenly maid, was young
Ere yet in early Greece she sung,
The Passions oft, to hear her shell,
Throng'd around her magic cell;

The tone and time must here change, and be varied to express the different emotions described.

f. 𝔥 p. 𝔪 ff. 𝔥 <pp.> 𝔩 .
Exulting, trembling, raging, fainting,
m. f. 𝔪
Possess'd beyond the Muse's painting,
By turns they felt the glowing mind,
<
Disturb'd, delighted, raised, refined;
> fz.
Till once, 'tis said, when all were fir'd,
con fuoco. f. <
Fill'd with fury, rapt, inspir'd,

This must be rapid, to express the suddenness of the action.

presto.
From the supporting myrtles round,
They seized her instruments of sound,

In ordinary time.

p.
And, as they oft had heard apart,
dolce.
Sweet lessons of her forceful art,
wildly fz. 𝔥
Each,—for madness rul'd the hour—
𝔪 mod.
Would prove his own expressive power.

1. FEAR.

Fear deprives the voice of its power; the tone becomes thin and feeble, and the utterance (when

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Figure 2.2 A selection from Vandenhoff's annotated version of William Collin's *The Passions.*

often think about musical factors *first*, deciding what the piece should *sound* like—its appropriate tempo, articulation, dynamics, etc.—before, almost as an afterthought, possibly adding some emotion, and then, only insofar that the emotion fits into the sound perimeters that already have been decided upon. However, I would propose that one ought to conceive of music not as sound that expresses some emotion, but rather as an emotion expressed in sound. If one's starting point were the activation of a strongly conceived affect, one that has become known to the performer kinesthetically through the repeated practice of acting, the concomitant tempo, timbre, and dynamic would be revealed at a stroke *by a memory of somatic experience*.[14] Or, barring that, we could at least meet the affect halfway, and then allow the sounds we produce to deepen the affect within us as the performance progresses.

My second remark is that this subjective experience of affect could then be disciplined by projecting it through the lens of HIP. Thus, a thorough understanding of the sources could allow one to combine general rules gleaned from the sources, such as those concerning good and bad beats, with more personal, individual experiences in order ultimately to create something both scholarly and artistic. For instance, the affect to be generated for a particular passage could be chosen by first examining the musical notation in the light of historical sources, taking meter signs, harmony, and melodic intervals into account. In this model, the proportion of the personal to the academic, the subjective to the objective, is always up for renegotiation, sharpening one's sense of operating, in creating art, somewhere between pure personal intuition and absolute obedience to historical sources as understood within a received performance tradition.

Finally, accessing personal feeling through historical acting techniques triumphantly returns the much scorned and deeply attractive ideal of the "authentic" to the HIP performer's arsenal, authentic here indicating the emphatic and incontestable experience of *oneself* in performance. As the human body has not changed significantly since the eighteenth century, one can reasonably assume that some aspects of an authentic performance (in the sense of "how it was then") and of a personal one (in the sense of "authentic to the performer") must overlap.[15] Trusting the "hard-wiring" of human affect, one can allow the memory of the sound of one's own affect-filled voice—and the feeling in one's own affect-possessed body—to inform and inspire one's musical practice. This can be done in a way that is at once both contemporary, personal, and embodied *and*, at the same time, historical, authentic, and academically acceptable. Rigorous approaches to historical acting can help us

[14] It should go without saying that this somatic experience must include, as John Walker says it should, the feeling of the effect that the sound of one's own declaiming voice (or musical performance) has on oneself.

[15] For a discussion of this from the psychological mechanistic terms see Bernhard Hommel, "Embodiment in Action," in *Historical Acting Techniques and the 21st-Century Body*, ed. Jed Wentz, special issue, *European Drama and Performance Studies*, 2022-2, no. 19: 91–97.

to avoid the beguiling pseudo-authenticity of programming that emphasizes supposed "living traditions" and "authentic identities," because these commodities turn out to be accessible to all of us in a (to my mind) more legitimate form when accessed from within through historically trained and disciplined *imaginations*.[16]

Returning to the beginning of this chapter, my distress in hearing my old recording of *Joseph*, my despair at realizing that much of my career has been characterized by an unsuccessful quest for expressive authenticity, pointed me clearly toward new opportunities for revitalization through acting and declamation. Though at the time I keenly felt *I can't get there from here*, the good news is that my body was there already.

[16] It is impossible to enter more fully on this idea here. I would assert, building on Hommel's article cited above, that the "living tradition" approach of some crossover programming merely taps into the cultural and contemporaneous side of our affective experience, whereas historical acting, which tends toward the physical generation of affect, accesses more primitive responses.