

# 1. Adequate Rhetorical Delivery when Staging Premodernity: A Combination of Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches<sup>1</sup>

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How do we approach voice and gesture when working with the performing arts from the eighteenth century? To my mind it requires adequate rhetorical delivery. For staging premodernity to be based on a thorough interpretation of both the artistic artefact and its context, rhetorical delivery – *actio* – must be taken into consideration.

An obvious historical method is the examination of rhetorical manuals of the period in order to learn from their illustrations, explanations, and practical advice, and then to attempt to transfer and transform this historical knowledge to contemporary performances. This could be defined as a *synchronic* approach, because it leads to specific insights into the eighteenth century and to the reception of rhetoric in the period.

I consider the *synchronic* approach both necessary and constructive as a means of familiarising oneself with the rhetoric and the aesthetics of a historical period. However, I would argue that it must be combined with a *diachronic* approach, which introduces a broader and longer-lasting perspective on the rhetorical delivery and on its impact on aesthetic performance. Classical rhetoric includes a theoretical concept – *kairós* – that might help us as we try to grasp this *diachronic* approach.

*Kairós* is often defined as timing, or as saying or doing something that fits the exact time, the specific occasion, and the particular audience. The concept therefore points towards the fact that rhetoric is deeply rooted in a specific situation and, moreover, that the situation

1. This essay is based on a paper read at a symposium devoted to acting in the late Enlightenment and organised by the research group Performing Premodernity in Stockholm in December 2014. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of Jette's family.

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is the speaker's greatest resource when choosing what to say or do. Words and actions can be used to embody *kairós* if they reflect the demands and potentials of the situation.

The concept of *kairós* is rooted in Sophistic thinking and is primarily connected with Isocrates (436–338 BCE), the heir of the Sophists. The concept was central both to his *philosophia* and to the ideals of his school, which was founded just outside Athens around 390 BCE. The combination of serious topics and stylistic training was devised to develop both the personalities of the pupils and their sense of individual rhetorical situations – *kairós*. In the writings of Isocrates, *kairós* is sometimes translated as 'time' or 'circumstances', and sometimes as 'situation' or 'occasion'. He uses the term in both a broad, external sense, and in a narrow, internal sense.

In general, the concept of *kairós* concerns the ontology of rhetoric, that is, its existence in the world. Rhetoric is capable of creating situations and is connected with the ancient Greek concept of *doxa* – opinion or judgement, which is embodied in practical reality – as opposed to the concept of *episteme*, that is, truth in a philosophical sense.

More narrowly defined, the concept of *kairós* concerns the particular rhetorical situation and refers to its determining role when a speaker or a performing artist either makes an utterance or performs an action. Thus, the rhetorical delivery of an actor or a singer may express *kairós* if, for example, the gestures are shaped in close interaction with the specific moment, the unique occasion, the stage, and the particular audience.

Professor Øivind Andersen has written on the definition of *kairós* as used by the Sophist Alcidas (who lived in the fourth century BCE).<sup>2</sup> Unlike Isocrates, Alcidas links the concept of *kairós* closely to oral improvisation, opining that the speech needs to be both invented and delivered at the very moment when the speaker is facing his audience. Only then will the speaker know with certainty what the right words and actions might be. Of course, he must prepare himself diligently

2. Øivind Andersen, 'Rette ord i rette tid: Kairos i klassisk retorik', *Rhetorica Scandinavica* 4 (1997), 21–27.

by developing arguments and choosing stylistic figures, gestures and suchlike that will underline his points and move the audience, but he must also remain open and shape the speech in interaction with the exact moment of performance.

At the Performing Premodernity symposium organised by the research group and held in Stockholm in December 2014, stage director Deda Cristina Colonna used the phrase ‘to trust one’s instincts’ when reflecting on her artistic work and on her way of directing early operas. As a rhetorician, I support this statement. When staging premodernity and unveiling the immanent orality of the period, we must, of course, prepare ourselves by studying and interpreting the era, its specific artistic artefacts, and its rhetoric (including the gestures that might have been used). When going from theory to practice and transforming our knowledge of the period into contemporary staging, we have to ‘trust our instincts’ and not rely solely on our *synchronic* knowledge. In this transformation process a *diachronic* approach to rhetorical delivery may help us to keep focused on the symbiotic interaction between the present moment and *kairotic* communication. And this is, in fact, what persuasive rhetoricians have always done.<sup>3</sup>

3. Further reading: Øivind Andersen, *I retorikkens hage* (Universitetsforlaget i Oslo, 1995); Tormod Eide, *Retorisk leksikon* (Universitetsforlaget i Oslo, 1990); Catherine R. Eskin and James L. Kinneavy, ‘Kairos’, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, ed. Gert Ueding, 11 vols. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1998), vol. 4; Charlotte Jørgensen and Lisa Villadsen (eds.), *Retorik: Teori og praksis* (Copenhagen: Samfundslitteratur, 2009).