

## 4. Contemporaneity in Historically Informed Performance

Magnus Tessing Schneider

*Theatre is first of all the actor, and it is contemporary bodies that embody the Antigones and the Phaedras, the Orestes and the Hamlets, the Don Juans, the Sganarelles, and the Ophelias.*

*Even if the stage director seeks to faithfully reconstruct the past, even if one pushes the historical verisimilitude of the costumes and props as far as possible, even if one plays Shakespeare in an auditorium that is an exact replica of the Globe Theatre, still the faces remain to resist the principle of imitation. The faces remain naked, and it is modern sensuality that traces the contours of their lips and shines in the sparkle of their eyes.<sup>1</sup>*

*At its most successful, Early Music does not return to the past at all but reconstructs the musical object in the here and now, enabling a new and hitherto silenced subject to speak.<sup>2</sup>*

### The turn towards representation

This chapter explores ways in which historical acting principles can enrich today's opera performances. I will start by suggesting that we turn away from theatre semiotics once and for all, which does not seem an adequate way either to account for theatrical communication or to generate productions that are able to engage the audience aesthetically and philosophically.<sup>3</sup>

I would argue that the emergence of theatre semiotics was linked closely to the emergence of postmodernism. In *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* from 1995, Dutch literary scholar Hans Bertens listed 'the return of representation' as one of several 'postmodernisms' that began to emerge in the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> What he had in mind was a turn towards the figurative (illusion, narrative, modelling) in the visual arts, away from the abstraction and formalism of the modernist

1. Jan Kott, 'Théâtre: Les Classiques Aujourd'hui', *Mosaic* 1, no. 4 (July 1968), 53–60: 53–54. Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own.

2. Laurence Dreyfus, 'Early Music Defended Against Its Devotees: A Theory of Historical Performance in the Twentieth Century', *The Musical Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (summer 1983), 297–322: 304.

3. Willmar Sauter's phenomenological approach to theatrical performance, as presented in his book *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception* (University of Iowa Press, 2000), has provided an important alternative to theatre semiotics. See also his chapters in this volume, chapter 3, 'Aesthetic Historicity', and chapter 11, 'An Aesthetics of Absence'.

4. Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995), 65–67.

---

#### How to cite this book chapter:

Tessing Schneider, M. 2023. Contemporaneity in Historically Informed Performance. In: Tessing Schneider, M. & Wagner, M. (Eds.). *Performing the Eighteenth Century: Theatrical Discourses, Practices, and Artefacts*, pp. 81–109. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/bce.e>. License: CC BY-NC 4.0.

avant-garde. But it is possible to understand the postmodern turn towards representation in a broader sense to include theatrical trends and theories about theatrical communication. One of these was theatre semiotics, which was first launched in 1968 by Polish theatre scholar Tadeusz Kowzan in his article 'The Sign in the Theatre: An Introduction to the Semiology of the Art of the Spectacle'.<sup>5</sup> In theatre semiotics the text, the actor, and all the auditive and visual aspects of the performance constitute a complex system of signs in which dramatic and scenic signifiers *represent* meanings, or values. It is then up to the spectator to decode and analyse them. Semiotic thinking gained prominence in the mid-1970s and flourished in the 1980s and into the 1990s, and some of its basic tenets and assumptions are still influential within theatre studies today.

Within theatrical practice, the postmodern turn towards representation can be exemplified by two, seemingly very different, artistic movements: the revival of historical acting styles and postmodern *Regietheater*. These flourished during the late twentieth century, at the same time as theatre semiotics.

A pioneering figure in the revival of eighteenth-century acting principles was the Australian musician and scholar Dene Barnett, whose work has had a momentous impact on the theatrical branch of the HIP (Historically Informed Performance) movement. However, Barnett was heavily influenced by the linguistic theories of his time. In 1974, for example, he wrote the article 'A New Semantical Theory of Egocentric Particulars', which displays his conception of human behaviours as revolving around signs.<sup>6</sup> And, unsurprisingly, this view also informed his systematic account of eighteenth-century acting, published in articles between 1977 and 1980, and then in a monograph, *The Art of Gesture: The Practices and Principles of 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Acting*, published in 1987. That the theatre historian Barnett remained true to his training in semiotics and logical positivism is clear from the following claims: eighteenth-century actors 'used a vocabulary of basic gestures, each with an individual meaning known to all

5. Published both in French and in an English translation by Simon Pleasance, Kowzan's article first appeared in *Diogenes* 16, no. 61, 52–80.

6. In *Synthese* 28, no. 3/4, special issue on Logical Semantics (November 1974), 533–547.

in advance', and their basic function was 'to create for the eyes of spectators a concrete picture of the ideas expressed by the words. Indicative and imitative gestures especially can have the vivid effect of *bringing before the eyes* events and things which are not on stage – events past, things distant, imaginary or abstract'.<sup>7</sup>

This concept of acting builds on a view of theatrical communication and emotional expression as basically revolving around signs. What is absent from Barnett's theory of gesture – and from Kowzan's theatre semiotics – is a conception of both the aesthetic experience and of the theatrical spectator as a creative agent who generates his or her own meanings.

The turn towards representation also characterises another theatrical trend that began in the mid-1970s. I reserve the term *Regietheater* for the postmodern type of directorial theatre, to distinguish it from the modernist type that emerged during the first half of the twentieth century. This distinction has not been sufficiently appreciated by theatre scholars, who tend to approach it from a polemical rather than a historical perspective, often acting as the movement's advocates. This means that they tend to treat performance and work as opposites, operating with a rigid dichotomy between the 'progressive' (i.e. performance-oriented) champions of *Regietheater* and the 'reactionary' (i.e. traditional musicological or literary) champions of *Werktreue*. German opera scholar Ulrich Müller has criticised these polemics and tried to take a more objective stance in his 2014 chapter on 'Regietheater/Director's Theater' in the *Oxford Handbook of Opera*, but even he ends up presenting *Regietheater* as the only alternative to the 'mirage' of *Werktreue*.<sup>8</sup> Given the parallel developments in the concept of the operatic work, what we are still missing is a historical account of the continued developments in directorial theatre that moves beyond clichéd notions of *Werktreue*.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, Müller is unable to give a credible account of the difference between the directorial theatre of the mid-twentieth century and the later *Regietheater*. He defines the latter as 'productions in

7. Dene Barnett, *The Art of Gesture: The Practices and Principles of 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Acting* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1987), 7, 10. Barnett's emphasis. For a detailed critique of his system, see my article 'Dene Barnett's Eighteenth Century, Or, What Is Historically Informed Performance?', in *Performing Premodernity Online* 2 (January 2015): <https://performingpremodernity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/PPO2-Schneider.pdf> (accessed 23 March 2023).

8. Ulrich Müller, 'Regietheater/Director's Theater', in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, ed. Helen M. Greenwald (Oxford University Press, 2014), 582–605: 591.

9. I have addressed some of the issues, specifically focusing on the rise of the concept of the operatic work in the second half of the eighteenth century, in the postscript, 'In Defense of the Operatic Work', to my book *The Original Portrayal of Mozart's Don Giovanni* (London: Routledge, 2021), 213–226: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429281709> (accessed 23 March 2023).

which the director and his team present the drama or musical theater in what is often a surprisingly new and often provocative manner, specifically the director's personal interpretation of the drama to a modern audience'.<sup>10</sup> While postmodern *Regietheater* certainly puts more emphasis on a 'provocative manner' than the modernist brand of directorial theatre, it is much less obvious that it also puts more emphasis on 'the director's personal interpretation'. In fact, the opposite is the case, since the decline in the *status* of the work has coincided with an inevitable decline in the personal *interpretation* of works: in today's postmodern theatre, plays and operas tend to be seen less as works of art with their own internal logic (which therefore call for interpretation) than as textual materials that the director can make use of. The rise of this concept of the work-as-material has in turn coincided with that of a new dichotomy between *presentation* (referring to the physical dimension of the performance) and *representation* (referring to its intellectual dimension when its meanings are conceived as *signs*). It is here that we recognise the similarity between postmodern *Regietheater* and Barnett's equally postmodern understanding of eighteenth-century acting principles, both of which reflect a fundamentally semiotic conception of theatrical communication.

As postmodernism, with its turn towards representation, remains a highly influential ideology today, it is no surprise to find the same conception in twenty-first-century academic criticism of eighteenth-century operas, such as Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. For example, in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, published in 2001, some of the volume's authors speculate on Mozart's soprano arias: 'How does the act of performance endorse, undercut, or relate in any way to the dramatic and social *content* of the work? And ultimately, what is the responsibility of those who put on Mozart's operas to take and "perform" a position on their *values*?'<sup>11</sup>

The writers assume that Mozart's opera *represents* certain outdated social values in the manner of a sign system. This leaves the critic with only two options: either to admire or reject its ideological

10. Müller, 'Regietheater/Director's Theater', 586.

11. Wye Jamison Allanbrook, Mary Hunter, and Gretchen A. Wheelock, 'Staging Mozart's Women', in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton University Press, 2001), 47–66: 47. Emphasis mine.

‘content’. It is this ultimately semiotic work-concept that provides the ideological justification for the postmodern *Regietheater*: if musical and dramatic forms are mere sensory *signifiers* for fixed ideological *signifieds*,<sup>12</sup> a politically aware director is obliged to deconstruct, parody, or otherwise frame the work to make it palatable for today, which is widely presumed to be a more enlightened age. This explains why theatrical provocations and scandals occupy such a central place within this movement: the *Regietheater* has turned the focus from the spectator’s individual aesthetic experience to his or her outward signs of approval or disapproval. The decline in the interpretation of works corresponds both to a decline in the interpretation of the past, which contributes to the production of simplistic narratives of historical progress, and to a decline in the philosophical reflection on our own aesthetic responses.

As an alternative to the concept of performance-as-representation, I propose a return to the concept of *contemporaneity* promoted by the twentieth-century Polish dramaturge Jan Kott, who was one of the principal theorists of directorial theatre during the 1960s and 1970s and a prominent detractor of postmodern *Regietheater* during the 1980s and 1990s. As Kott wrote in 1968, the contemporary faces of the actors always ‘resist the principle of imitation’, by which he apparently referred not simply to traditional stage realism, but to the principle of representation as such. A person’s face can never be a sign.

### In the theatre, contemporaneity and beauty are the same

In his essay about Polish *Hamlet* productions from the 1950s, published in his seminal book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Kott insisted that ‘we ought to get at our modern experience, anxiety and sensibility’ through Shakespeare’s text, and that the ideal *Hamlet* production would be one ‘most true to Shakespeare and most modern at the same time’.<sup>13</sup> He also famously stated that the play, like a sponge, ‘immediately absorbs all the problems of our time’, unless it is produced

12. I am using this term in the structuralist sense, to denote a concept or idea evoked by a sign.

13. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, tr. Boleslaw Taborski (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1964), 59, 64.

‘in a stylized or antiquarian fashion’.<sup>14</sup> In other words, revealing the contemporaneity in a classic presupposes a personal interpretation of the text, without which the work remains dead. In an essay from 1968 about modern productions of classics, Kott returned to the topic with a challenge to the stage directors of his time, confronting the prejudice that a hermeneutic interpretation is a mere explanatory exegesis: ‘what we demand from the classics is that they enter *our* world to speak of *their* experiences, but we are the ones asking the questions. And if they give no answer, they stop existing in the theatre: they are only revived to be buried’.<sup>15</sup> Yet ‘contemporaneity’ in a performance is not achieved by simply adding references to topical political events; it must be a relationship between the time inhabited by the actors and the time inhabited by the audience. As Kott defined it in a panel debate in the late 1980s, that relationship is ‘what finally establishes whether Shakespeare is considered to be a contemporary or not. When the two times are closely connected, then Shakespeare is our contemporary’.<sup>16</sup> However, in an essay written shortly before his death, Kott added the further qualification: ‘contemporaneity is never given to us: it is asked of us – and of our theatres’.<sup>17</sup>

Kott’s concept of contemporaneity was directly opposed to the *topicality* promoted by postmodern *Regietheater*, in which the work is often used to stage a coded representation of topical trends, events, or ideological formations. Unlike topicality, contemporaneity is by nature aesthetic and dialogic, engaging both the artists and the audience in a creative exchange with the text and with the past evoked by the text. It is therefore more closely related to the concept of *kairós* discussed in chapter 1 of this volume.<sup>18</sup>

It may seem odd that Kott distinguished between the time inhabited by the audience and the time inhabited by the actors, because, at least on the specific, physical level, both audience and actors undeniably inhabit the same time, whereas only the dramatic characters inhabit a different time. Elsewhere, Kott maintains that theatrical communication features three interlocutors: the spectator and the actor, who are

14. Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 64.

15. Kott, ‘Théâtre: Les Classiques Aujourd’hui’, 59. Kott’s emphasis.

16. In John Elsom (ed.), *Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary?* (London: Routledge, 1990), 12.

17. Jan Kott, ‘Last Words’, *Theater* 32, no. 3 (2002), 25–26: 26.

18. Chapter 1, Jette Barnholdt Hansen, ‘Adequate Rhetorical Delivery when Staging Premodernity’.

contemporaries, and the text, which is a voice from the past.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, his statement seems consistent with his reluctance to distinguish between the time of the author and the time of the text, which I interpret as a refusal to distinguish between poetic form and dramatic content, that is, between the language of the author and the actions of the characters, as the semioticians do. These are all encapsulated in the words of the play, the ‘text’ encompassing the time of the author and the time of the drama. When we say that Shakespeare is our contemporary we are therefore referring both to his dramatic characters, and to his poetic language. Contemporaneity is an experience of presence that allows us to enter a space-time unique to that theatrical moment. In this sense it is the actor who breathes life into the language and inhabits a verbal world from the past, into which the audience is invited.

It seems to me that this experience of contemporaneity – which Kott sees as the principal aim of theatrical communication – is identical with what we might describe as *beauty* in the theatre. That is, if, as Danish philosopher Dorthe Jørgensen proposes, we understand beauty as an *experience*, and not as ‘a quality of objects’:

Furthermore, it is not about experience of beauty understood as something being nice and neat. On the contrary, it is about the experience of something having *value in itself*, and of us being *part of something larger*. The experience of beauty is therefore an experience of cohesion and meaningfulness. According to Kant it is about something as fundamental as our ‘feeling of life’ (*Lebensgefühl*) and what this feeling says about us, including our relationship to each other and to the world.<sup>20</sup>

Just as Kott defines contemporaneity as a special relationship between the audience, the actor, and the text, Jørgensen defines beauty as a special relationship between the beholder and the object. As that relationship is aesthetic and experiential, in both cases it is bound to a place and a moment in time, and what it generates is ‘an experience of cohesion and meaningfulness’. When we feel that the dead playwright and his characters are our contemporaries it is exactly because we

19. Kott, ‘Théâtre: Les Classiques Aujourd’hui’, 55.

20. Dorthe Jørgensen, *Poetic Inclinations: Ethics, History, Philosophy* (Aarhus University Press, 2021), 45. Jørgensen’s emphasis.



feel that we are part of something larger, because our contemporary moment is expanded to include a past world. In the rare moments of theatrical contemporaneity, we experience, aesthetically, a connectedness to other people and to another time that permits us to understand our relationship to ourselves, to each other, and to our world in a way that invites deeper philosophical reflection.

### The shock of the image

Unlike the classical concept of beauty, which is defined by the object's organic unity and harmonious proportions, Jørgensen's philosophical concept of beauty is defined by the experience of something having value in itself. It does not have to be 'nice and neat', as she puts it. Indeed, the experience of beauty is often unsettling, just as the experience of contemporaneity can be unsettling.

I had such an experience when Galathée came to life in Performing Premodernity's production of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's and Horace Coignet's *Pygmalion* from 1770, first mounted at the theatre of Český Krumlov Castle in 2015.<sup>21</sup> The forty-minute performance constituted one long build-up to that moment. Such a moment is hard to imagine on the basis of a mere reading of the play. The sequence of short orchestral interludes that accompanied the sculptor's silent gestures throughout his monologue culminated with the triumphant music when the statue of Galathée – performed by Laila Cathleen Neuman – dismounted her pedestal and walked around the stage with fragile hesitancy. Trying out the movements of her legs and arms as if for the first time, she absorbed everything with newly awakened senses and marvelled at her own graceful gestures, the softness of her skin, the acuteness of her sensations. After she spoke her first word, 'Moi', the music was heard no more. She laid eyes on her creator, and the curtain descended on a silent stage. The absence of an actual musical climax at the end of the *scène lyrique* was aesthetically startling in a way that is hard to put into words. The frozen representation dissolved in warm contemporaneity. The staged performance too dissolved as the immobile

21. For videos of this production, see the Performing Premodernity homepage: <https://performingpremodernity.com/anthology/>.



figure realised herself as a woman. This was literally the ‘pygmalionism’ that Felicity Baker has described as ‘the eighteenth-century criterion of aesthetic success’, the goal of eighteenth-century art being ‘its own abolition, its replacement by “the real thing”’.<sup>22</sup> It was through the very breakdown of organic unity and harmonious proportions that the unique beauty of the theatrical moment came into being.

The acclaimed British voice coach and stage director Patsy Rodenburg describes a far more shocking experience of contemporaneity-as-beauty. It was related to her by a stranger she met when she was doing a book signing in a theatre in Adelaide in Australia:

I was lecturing on voice and text to an audience of mostly theatre practitioners. I was discussing release, sound purging us, all the issues involved with seizing the right to speak, the words we need and the sounds that free us. I noticed in the audience a man who was evidently not an actor. He was sitting very rigidly, looking down. His body language was tight and held. He wore a business suit. He was very out of place. It crossed my mind, ‘Why is he here?’

At the end of my lecture I was answering questions and I noticed he was hovering, waiting to speak to me. Somehow I knew this conversation would be difficult, but I was sure I would have to face him. When everyone had gone, he moved slowly towards me. Throughout most of our conversation he refused to look at me. He said, ‘My wife and I once went to a play. A Greek play. About women in Troy’. ‘*The Trojan Women*?’ I offered. ‘Yes, that’s it’. Pause. ‘There was a woman in the play who lost her son. He was thrown from a wall. The actress made a sound. She made this awful, embarrassing sound’. Pause. ‘When we left the theatre my wife and I said that sound wasn’t real. It wasn’t real’. Silence. In the silence I thought, is he saying that to release sound with passion is unreal? I didn’t speak because he was struggling with something. After maybe two minutes he continued, his voice now flat and over-controlled: ‘Two years ago a policeman came into my office at work and told me that my daughter’s body had been found. She had been raped and murdered’. Pause. ‘I made that sound. I made the same sound the actress had made. I’ve never told my wife that I made that sound’. Suddenly he looked me in the eyes. ‘That actress was real and we didn’t understand reality at the time because it hadn’t touched us yet’. He smiled. ‘Not a good way finally to understand truth in art. Thank you’. He turned and walked away.

22. The concept of ‘pygmalionism’ is borrowed from Jean Starobinski. See Felicity Baker, *Don Giovanni’s Reasons: Thoughts on a Masterpiece*, ed. Magnus Tessing Schneider (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021), 91.

The great lesson for actors is surely that the truth they are communicating is not only for the now but for the future. An audience might not understand yet but perhaps one day they will. Equally true, you have to remember that there is every likelihood that at every performance there is a member of the audience who understands more about a given situation than you do. Again, the responsibility is to endeavour to communicate truth without in any way patronizing those who really have lived situations and know. It is said that the great act is to comfort the distressed and distress the comfortable.<sup>23</sup>

The theatrical experience of contemporaneity, which requires humility on the part of the performer, can connect us to the future as well as to the past. In this Australian performance of *The Trojan Women* (415 BCE) by Euripides, the actor inhabited a different time than the spectator who only entered her time when tragedy had struck for real. Whether we conceive of the actor as inhabiting the past or the present, the experience of contemporaneity expands the present moment. And, as Rodenburg suggests, its beauty can be distressing as well as comforting, connecting us to other people who may be real or fictive, who may be seated right next to us, or who may be dead.

The sound that had stuck in the spectator's memory was what American literary theorist Brenda Machosky describes as an 'allegorical image', since it resembled (as opposed to represented) the sound he would later make himself. Unlike the mimetic representation, the image 'is a resemblance, something that cannot be conceptualized because it cannot be grasped'; and unlike the sign, which must be transparent, it is 'uniquely opaque; something remains inaccessible'.<sup>24</sup> It was the ungraspability and opaqueness of the theatrical image – its 'having value in itself' – that made the performance he had once seen resurface when he lived through the most painful moment of his life. When the grieving father made the sound of the grieving Andromache, both the performance and the ancient tragedy became contemporary. He was, in that moment, Andromache, the image of all helpless and despairing parents whose children have been murdered.

The example shows how inadequate a concept 'representation' is when it comes to describing and understanding the real significance of

23. Patsy Rodenburg, *The Actor Speaks: Voice and the Performer*, second edition (London and New York: Methuen Drama: 1997/2020), 248–249. A few years before the Australian book signing Rodenburg had recorded her advice on how to achieve maximum emotional effect with the bereaved Andromache's speech from Euripides' *Trojan Women*, the scene in question; see *The Need for Words: Voice and the Text*, second edition (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 1993/2018), 228–231. She has also told the story about the grieving father in the filmed lecture she gave at Michael Howard Studios in New York City on 17 April 2008: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9jjhGq8pMM> (accessed 12 January 2022).

24. Brenda Machosky, *Structures of Appearing: Allegory and the Work of Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 30.

a theatrical event. It underlines that contemporaneity is never found in signs. Contemporaneity is an aesthetic experience that occurs when the spectator realises that the theatrical image resembles something he or she has experienced before, and which suddenly becomes present in his or her imagination.

### Interpreting the cry

Moments such as the one described by Rodenburg do not only occur in the spoken theatre. They may occur in opera as well. Joseph von Sonnenfels described a moment in the premiere production of *Alceste* (1767), an adaption of Euripides' *Alcestis* (438 BCE) with music by Christoph Willibald Gluck and text by Ranieri Calzabigi, which resembles the moment described by Rodenburg in the modern production of his *Trojan Women*. In 1768 Sonnenfels was particularly struck by the singer Antonia Bernasconi's performance of the aria at the end of act 2, when Alceste, who has vowed to die in her husband's place, bids a final farewell to her children with the following words:

---

È il più fiero di tutti i tormenti	It is the fiercest of all torments
lo staccarsi da' dolci suoi figli;	to separate from one's sweet children,
e lasciarli fra tanti perigli,	and to leave them in such perils,
e lasciarli nel pianto così. <sup>25</sup>	and to leave them in tears like this!

---

Sonnenfels described Bernasconi's performance of the aria as follows: 'The ending is a high, piercing tone: the true accent of maternal feeling strained to the utmost, in which the voice leaps, as it were, and emits a jarring sound that is painful to the ear but thereby wounds the heart of the spectator, leaving its sting in the wound for a long time'.<sup>26</sup> We can see how that uncomfortable sound, the cry of a mother taking leave of her children one last time, resembles the 'awful, embarrassing sound' of Andromache in the Australian production who lived through a similar moment. Sonnenfels also described Bernasconi's acting in this moment:

25. Ranieri de' Calsabigi, *Alceste: Tragedia per musica* (Vienna: Stamperia di Ghelen, 1767), act 2, scene 6.

26. 'Der Schluss ist ein hoher, schneidender Ton; der wahre Accent der auf das höchste gespannten mütterlichen Empfindung, wo die Stimme gleichsam überspringt, und einen Misslaut giebt, welcher dem Ohre peinlich fällt, aber eben dadurch das Herz des Zuschauers verwundet, und den Stachel in der Wunde noch lange zurücklässt'. Joseph von Sonnenfels, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10 vols. (Vienna: mit von Baumeisterischen Schriften, 1783–1787), 5: 175.

27. 'Ihre Gebehrde folget nur den Bewegungen des Herzens, und ihr Herz führet sie beständig auf den angemessensten, und nicht selten auf den feinsten Ausdruck. Sie hat bei der dritten Wiederholung Alcestens einen von diesen glücklichen Zügen in der Schlussarie des zweyten Aufzugs bei den Worten: diess ist der Quaaln grösste Quaal, von süssen Kindern sich zu trennen, angebracht. Das erste und zweytemal machte sie bei dem Worte *Trennen* die Bewegung der gewaltsamen Entfernung. Es war eine der malenden Gebehrden, die für das Aug eben so deutlich, als die Worte für das Ohr sind: aber auch ein allgemeiner Schauspieler, oder allenfalls der Dichter, so der Schauspielerinn einen Unterricht gäbe, würde auf so etwas verfallen seyn. Das drittemal, ohne Zweifel, da ihre Einbildung von der hervorstehenden schmerzlichen Trennung lebhafter gerühret, und ihre Empfindung heftiger angegriffen war, schoss sie einen wilden, gefühlvollen Blick auf Aspasien, liess ihn eine Weile unbeweglich an ihr hangen; dann aber, als der Begriff der Trennung nahte, warf sie sich dem Kinde plötzlich an dem Hals, umschlang es mit beiden Armen, gleich als wäre der Augenblick der Trennung itzt vorhanden, und gleich als wäre sie diesen grausamen Augenblick durch ihre Widersetzung zu entfernen fähig. Nichts ist wahrhafter, als dieser Ausdruck. So würde auf einem Gemälde des französischen Raphaels Clytemnestra ihre Tochter umfassen, wann sie der grausame Calchas an den Schlachttisch Dianens zu schleppen bereit steht; so würde den Bräutigam, seine Braut umschlingen, die ihm die wütende Wollust brünstiger Söldner zu rauben, sich nahte.

Her gesture follows only the stirrings of the heart, and her heart invariably leads her to the most appropriate, and not seldom to the subtlest expression. At Alceste's third performance she added one of these happy strokes to the concluding aria of the second act at the words: 'It is the fiercest of all torments to part from one's sweet children'. The first and the second time, at the word 'to part' [i.e. 'staccarsi', ed.], she made a movement of forcible removal. It was one of the painting gestures, which are just as clear to the eye as the words are to the ear: but even a common actor, or at best the poet instructing the actress, would have thought of something like that. The third time – no doubt because her imagination was stirred more vividly by the painful separation that was about to occur, and her sensibility was more violently affected – she threw a wild, emotional glance at Aspasia and kept it fixed on her for a while; but then, as the idea of their separation approached, she suddenly threw herself around the neck of the child, embracing her with both arms, as if the moment of separation had now come, and as if she were able to remove the cruel moment through her resistance. Nothing is truer than that expression. Thus would Clytemnestra, in a painting by the French Raphael [i.e. Nicolas Poussin, ed.], embrace her daughter when the cruel Calchas is about to drag her off to Diana's slaughter-table; thus would the bride embrace her groom as the furious lust of wanton mercenaries threatens to ravish her.

I only saw this trait that one time, though I paid eager attention to it in the following performances. I am convinced that if someone asked Bernasconi to give the reason, she would not think long before answering: 'It was a natural impulse'.<sup>27</sup>

No doubt, it was the concurrence of the 'jarring sound that is painful to the ear' and the passionate embrace that created the truthful expression of parental grief in this performance of *Alceste*, which made such an impression on the eighteenth-century spectator. 'Truth', which was an acting ideal of the Enlightenment,<sup>28</sup> also happens to be the word used by Rodenburg's grieving spectator when describing the performance by the Andromache in *The Trojan Women*.

Inevitably, in an opera performance, such rare moments of truthful resemblance entail a seamless unity of musical form and theatrical expression. This was implicit when Bo Holten, the opera composer,

told me once that his ultimate goal is to make the audience forget that the performers are singing. It is also implied in the statement by a German opera critic, writing in 1823, who declared that the character and music of Max in Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz* (1821) demand 'simple, powerful acting, in the music as well, so that one forgets, just as in a spoken play, that one is looking at a theatrical stage. It is not unreasonable to demand this illusion from singers, for it is possible'.<sup>29</sup>

These are all examples of 'pygmalionism' as described in the previous section: in the moment of contemporaneity, there is no distinction between form and meaning, and art is replaced by 'the real thing'.

## Contemporaneity and style

Gluck was long seen as a composer who kept emotional expression tightly corseted, unlike later masters such as Richard Wagner or Alban Berg: a view that has more to do with what David Wiles calls 'the standard eighteenth-century package', developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, than it does with what people actually envisioned and heard in the eighteenth century.<sup>30</sup> Such progressivist narratives thrive and proliferate in line with the postmodern decline of interpretation, including the decline of historical hermeneutics, and thus prevent the works of the past from becoming contemporary. It is up to the dramaturge, the director, the conductor, and the performer to demolish these narratives and liberate the contemporaneity that lies hidden as potentials in the old scores.

One of my great operatic experiences was a performance in 2002 of Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Macbeth* (1847) at the Berlin State Opera, directed by Peter Mussbach. This production, inspired by the aesthetic of the expressionists, seemed to have taken its cue from Jan Kott's statement that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* shows the struggle for power as a nightmare that 'paralyses and terrifies' (see Fig. 1).<sup>31</sup> In act 1, scene 5,

Ich habe diesen Zug nur das  
einemal gesehen, ob ich gleich bei  
den folgenden Vorstellungen begierig  
darauf Acht hatte. Ich bin versichert,  
hätte man Bernaskoni om eine Ursache  
angegangen, sie würde sich nicht lange  
bedacht haben, zu antworten: Es  
war ein Trieb der Natur'. Sonnenfels:  
*Gesammelte Schriften*, 5: 182–184.

28. See chapter 8 in this volume, Petra Dotlačilová, 'Costume in the Age of Rousseau and the Case of *Pygmalion*'.

29. '[...] der übrige Theil der Rolle, wie der Gesangsparthie will durchaus nur durch einfaches, kräftiges Spiel auch in der Musik gefallen, so dass man, wie im Schauspiel vergisst, dass man vor der Bühne steht. Es ist nicht unbillig, diese Täuschung von Sängern zu verlangen, denn sie ist möglich'. *Originalien aus dem Gebiete der Wahrheit, Kunst, Laune und Phantasie* 7 (1823), 688 [696].

30. David Wiles, chapter 4, 'Presenting the Theatre of Drottningholm', 278. See, for example, Michel Poizat's characterisation of Gluck in the subsection 'Prima le Parole?' in *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, tr. Arthur Denner (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 55–58.

31. Kott: *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 76.





**Figure 1.** Lucio Gallo (Macbeth) and Sylvie Valayre (Lady Macbeth) in *Macbeth* by Giuseppe Verdi. Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin, 2000. Staging: Peter Mussbach. Set design: Erich Wonder. Costumes: Andrea Schmidt-Futterer. Photo: Ruth Walz © picture 009. License: CC BY-NC.

Lady Macbeth – sung by French soprano Sylvie Valayre – rushed forward from the back of the stage to stand right in front of the first row of the audience, where she performed her aria, ‘Vieni! T’affretta’, an ecstatic summoning of the infernal spirits of political ambition. She sang it as a rousing battle song, hurling her coloraturas into the auditorium like fatal javelins. Delivering the entire part in a husky, shrill,

and screechy voice that proudly renounced all claims to *bel canto*, Valayre's singing resembled the blood-crazed cries of some kind of fantastical vulture. This was a Lady Macbeth devoid of humanity, seemingly derived from the nightmarish visions of Goya or Fuseli. It was an excessive portrayal, but it was also a performance beyond clichés or caricature. Lady Macbeth's music communicated a crude and exuberant sense of purpose and superiority, which enthused the audience while transporting us into her terrifying inner world. After the warlike cabaletta, the singer – still in character as Lady Macbeth – acknowledged the thunderous applause with deep, self-conscious bows: knowing that she had fully earned the obedient adulation of the multitude, she held all of us under her spell.<sup>32</sup>

No recording or video could have done justice to this performance: not only was Lady Macbeth's idiosyncratic timbre an acoustical effect created by the singer through her way of projecting the voice into the auditorium; the aesthetic effect of the sound was virtually inseparable from her acting and the visual design.<sup>33</sup> It was characteristic of my experience of contemporaneity in this *Macbeth* that the 'pastness' in both the action with its medieval power struggles and in Verdi's music was transcended. The performance defied ingrained performance traditions and observed no distinction between form and meaning. The lush timbres and emotional pathos associated with Romantic opera gave way to an expressionistic rawness, as if Verdi had been a contemporary of Alban Berg and Kurt Weill, or even Tom Waits. And yet Valayre's 'modernist' style of singing remained true to a composer who once insisted that Lady Macbeth should be 'ugly and evil', and that her voice should be 'harsh, stifled, and hollow' and have a 'diabolical quality'.<sup>34</sup> Refusing to offer what we might call the standard nineteenth-century package, the production chose another nineteenth century as its model, one that was at the same time true to Verdi and to the modern audience. For me, its contemporaneity was embodied by the vulture's cries that resembled the enthusing but dehumanising craving for power lurking beneath the

32. Watching an online interview with the singer years later, I saw that she strove to create a diabolical sound: <https://www.peter-mussbach.de/film-buehne/macbeth> (accessed 17 January 2021).

33. I had a similar experience when I heard Joyce DiDonato perform the title role in Jules Massenet's 1899 opera *Cendrillon* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 2018. The contrast between the veiled, shadowy voice of the poor stepdaughter Cinderella and the clear, radiant voice of the brilliant queen of the ball was created by the singer's vocal projection and could not have been captured on a recording.

34. Letter from Giuseppe Verdi to Salvatore Cammarano of 23 November 1848, quoted from Andrew Porter and David Rosen, *Verdi's Macbeth: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 67.



veneer of civilisation. But the beauty of the allegorical image also depended on the unique aesthetic qualities of the work, on the specific *tinta musicale* (musical colouring) that Verdi has given to each of his operas.

### The pitfalls of objectivism and exoticism

This is an example of how today's directorial theatre can generate experiences of contemporaneity, when directors refrain from letting the productions represent topical events or trends in the manner of signs. This was not a postmodern production. The centrality of hermeneutic interpretation and aesthetic contemporaneity in Mussbach's *Macbeth*, in addition to the evident refusal to adhere to the semiotic work-concept and treat the score as a mere 'material' for performance, suggests that this director had continued in the mid-twentieth-century modernist tradition of directorial theatre. In fact, inspired as it was by the indications found in Verdi's letters, one might even regard his and Valayre's depiction of Lady Macbeth as both *werktreu* and as belonging to the HIP movement – though obviously not in the standard sense, as the Berlin production under no circumstances could be described as a 'period production'. Rather, the production was an example of what I like to call 'historically informed dramaturgy'.

My non-dogmatic use of the term 'historically informed' comes close to American musicologist Laurence Dreyfus' discussion of the potentials and pitfalls of the Early Music movement. Back in 1983, he stated that the best period performances succeed in reconstructing the musical object in the here and now, thereby 'enabling a new and hitherto silenced subject to speak'. This matches Kott's definition of theatrical contemporaneity as a unique relationship that momentarily bridges the gap between past and present.

However, as he was writing at the time when Barnett was launching his positivist sign system of eighteenth-century gestures, Dreyfus aptly identified 'objectivism' as a widespread ideological bias within

the Early Music community. He defined this ideological bias as ‘the epistemological proposition that knowledge is assured by accurately describing things in the world without taking stock of the biased vantage point from which the (human) observer perceives the phenomena’.<sup>35</sup> Following Theodor Adorno, he argued that adherents of the objectivist stance both ignore ‘crucial nonempirical considerations – such as emotional expression or the meaning of the work’, and tend to ‘relegate questions of aesthetic value and critique to a secondary, if not meaningless, status under the guise of furthering rigorous scholarship’.<sup>36</sup> Not only do such practitioners share the false conviction that ‘proper application of the rules guarantees accurate “period style”’, but in order to ‘maintain equilibrium in a mythical kingdom of the past, replete with courtly values and (palpably) harmonious relations’, they ‘forcibly [repress] every sign of the present’.<sup>37</sup>

From his modernist standpoint, Dreyfus accused the objectivist branch of the HIP movement of the forcible repression of the present. The latter suggests a turning away from contemporaneity as an aim for performance, which brings Kott’s criticism of 1980s *Regietheater* to mind. Both HIP and *Regietheater* were accused of neglecting aesthetic contemporaneity and hermeneutic interpretation, which, again, is an indication of the high extent to which they were influenced by the same ideological currents of semiotics and postmodernism at the time of their emergence. Postmodern HIP and postmodern *Regietheater* both operate with a conception of the work as a representation of historical ‘values’. The movements only differ in their attitude towards the representations. While the HIP objectivists aim to communicate them faithfully, maintaining equilibrium ‘in a mythical kingdom of the past’, the *Regietheater* directors and the theatre scholars and musicologists supporting the movement (such as the Mozart scholars cited above)<sup>38</sup> reject the underlying ‘values’.

Kott anticipated this development as early as in 1964 when he maintained that a ‘stylized or antiquarian’ staging of *Hamlet* would curb the ability of Shakespeare’s text to become contemporary. What

35. Dreyfus, ‘Early Music’, 299.

36. Dreyfus, ‘Early Music’, 300–301.

37. Dreyfus, ‘Early Music’, 319, 305.

38. See p. 84.

Kott refers to as ‘antiquarian’ is what Dreyfus calls ‘objectivism’. It is less immediately evident what Kott means by ‘stylized’; but he might be referring to the way stylisation and antiquarianism both emphasise the general at the expense of the particular, that is, fitting the drama into a model in which the uniqueness of the characters and situations are lost.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, stylisation and antiquarianism both tend to draw attention to the form in a way that is likely to hamper the spectator’s emotional engagement, so essential to the achievement of contemporaneity. In other words, we are unlikely to forget that Alceste sings when she says goodbye to her children.

Stylisation was central to Barnett’s concept of eighteenth-century acting, which he declared was ‘highly articulate and capable of both Baroque intensity and grandeur, and the legendary subtleties of body language’, while it ‘displayed a beauty, nobility, clarity and ceremony which matched that of the verse, and the music, which it accompanied, reflected and sometimes duplicated’.<sup>40</sup> The execution of Barnett’s sign system of gestures was meant to be pleasant to behold, but it was also fundamentally exotic in its reliance on a lost language supposedly known to the eighteenth-century audience. In a definition by cultural theorist Graham Huggan, ‘exoticism’, is ‘a particular mode of aesthetic perception’ that ‘renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery’.<sup>41</sup> Exoticism has been appropriately described as ‘the aesthetics of decontextualisation’.<sup>42</sup> Huggan, drawing on Tzvetan Todorov, also gives the following definition: ‘Knowledge is incompatible with exoticism, but lack of knowledge is in turn irreconcilable with praise of others; yet praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be. This is its constitutive paradox’.<sup>43</sup> If exoticism in objectivist period productions is ‘a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity’,<sup>44</sup> the strangeness of exoticism tends to take the form of an alienation of the audience while the familiarity may be described as the reproduction of

39. On the importance of uniqueness, or specificity, in historically informed performances, see my interview with Mark Tatlow in this book, chapter 10, ‘From the General to the Specific’.

40. Barnett, *The Art of Gesture*, 7.

41. Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), 13.

42. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 16.

43. Quoted in Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 17.

44. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 13.

fetishised images of e.g. the ‘Baroque period’, often carefully copied from prints and paintings. As in the *Regietheater*, the focus is on signs rather than interpretation.

A related problem is that Barnett’s acting theory completely ignores the issue of character, which may partly be because his background was as a musician, and not an actor. Consequently, his aesthetic criteria tended to be musical rather than dramatic, which means that his focus is on musicalised stage movement and on the scenic expression of the emotions conveyed by the music. Music, however, has no equivalent to dramatic character. When we refer to the ‘character’ of a musical piece we are really referring to its *mood*, and hence the word denotes something entirely different to a character in a play. In Aristotle’s definition, character (*êthos*) is ‘that which reveals the moral purpose of the agents’,<sup>45</sup> and while music is certainly capable of any conceivable emotional appeal (*páthos*), it is unable to tell us whether the person expressing that emotion is good or bad, at least not without the assistance of another art form, such as poetry or dance. Theatre is able to convey moral qualities, however, because tragedy, as Aristotle says, is the ‘imitation of an action’ (*drâma*), and character is revealed above all through the actions of the agent.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, Barnett’s failure to deal with the performance of character on the eighteenth-century stage accounts for his neglect of the moral and political issues with which the theatre artists of the time were deeply concerned.

This is not to say that the HIP movement has not developed since the 1980s. In fact, many of today’s artists and theatre pedagogues who are concerned with the revival of historical acting principles have distanced themselves from the formulaic austerity of Barnett’s vision, focusing more on the technical insights that may be derived from the study of historical treatises.<sup>47</sup> Italian stage director and choreographer Deda Cristina Colonna, who prefers to refer to her practice as historically informed ‘acting’ rather than ‘gestures’, describes one way of avoiding the pitfalls of this kind of antiquarianism, or exoticism, in order to give space to personal interpretation:

45. Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, tr. Ingram Bywater (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), part 6.

46. Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, part 4.

47. See e.g. Jed Wentz’s chapter, “‘Mechanical Rules’ versus ‘*Abnormis gratia*’: Revaluing Gilbert Austin’s *Chironomia* (1806) as a Source for Historical Acting Techniques’, in *Theatrical Heritage: Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. Bruno Forment and Christel Stalpaert (Leuven University Press, 2015), 41–58, which contains a critique of Barnett’s system, as well as his collected volume *Historical Acting Techniques and the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Body*, in the series European Drama and Performance Studies (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2022), especially the introduction, “‘I Was Just Saying the Lines’”, 11–54. For a discussion of today’s different approaches to HIP acting, see also David Wiles, ‘Eighteenth-Century Acting: The Search for Authenticity’, in Willmar Sauter and David Wiles, *The Theatre of Drottningholm – Then and Now: Performance between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries* (Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 2014), 184–213: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:756254/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (accessed 23 March 2023).

I regard the lessons I get from the sources as answers that were given in the past to certain problems or technical issues. Many of these questions remain crucial to staging or choreographing, even today: they belong to the *métier*. So, I try to ask myself the same questions and use the answers of the past to orient my vision, or my method. I try to detect paths, or to understand the function behind a 'rule'. What I never like to do is copying a shape; I try to start from my spontaneous reaction to what seems – according to my artistic sensitivity – the most relevant aspect of the piece, dance, or text.<sup>48</sup>

While Barnett's antiquarianism, or exoticism, is problematic mainly for aesthetical reasons, his objectivism, or positivism, is also problematic for historiographical reasons. We see his positivist bias reflected in his decision to study only prescriptive sources (e.g., books about acting technique or rhetorical manuals) while ignoring descriptive sources (e.g., reviews and memoirs), because, as he admits, it is less easy to extract general rules from these.<sup>49</sup> By ignoring all accounts of specific performances, however, he ignores all evidence of the historical relation between artistic practice and aesthetic effect. One could argue that a comprehensive and holistic study of historical acting principles must take the aesthetic dimension into account – for example, a source like Sonnenfels' reaction to Bernasconi's vocal and bodily gestures – rather than just the specific details of the physical movements divorced from their communicative context. Again, we recognise here the basically semiotic concept of theatre that we know from Kowzan. Moreover, it was not only the spectator's experience that Barnett passed over. He also ignored the eighteenth century's philosophical debates on dramatic and theatrical aesthetics, which includes Diderot's and Rousseau's influential rejection of the dramaturgy and acting style associated with French Classical theatre, and Gluck's prefaces to his scores.<sup>50</sup> By disregarding the dramatic and intellectual context of the theatre, Barnett was also ignoring the ideological implications of the practices, which were of crucial significance to the theorists and reformers of the time. By fitting the works of these

48. Email interview of 23 November 2017.

49. Barnett, *The Art of Gesture*, 10.

50. For discussions of how to remain true to Rousseau's reformist vision, see Maria Gullstam's, Petra Dotlačilová's, and David Wiles' contributions to this volume, 'Rousseau's Pygmalion as Research on Stage' (chapter 7), 'Costume in the Age of Rousseau and the Case of Pygmalion' (chapter 8), and 'Presenting the Theatre of Drottningholm' (chapter 13).

artists into a stereotypical conception of eighteenth-century performance, they are bound to be identified with the artistic, intellectual, and social restrictions against which the artists very often reacted.

Next, I will propose an alternative way of studying eighteenth-century acting principles, which takes account of the communicative and aesthetic dimensions. While not rejecting the study of prescriptive sources, I suggest that they be complemented by the study of historical accounts of performances or portrayals that describe their effects on the audience. This requires us to reject Barnett's rigid positivism and deceptive objectivism in favour of a contextualisation of the sources and a more holistic conception of acting. Such an approach serves as a challenge to both Barnett's historiography, and to his aesthetic views, including his postmodern conception of performance as a semiotic representation of values.

### Individualised acting in the eighteenth century

One of the most admired singer-actors of the late eighteenth century was the Italian baritone Luigi Bassi (1766–1825) who created the title role in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in 1787, and whose portrayal of that role I have studied in depth (see Fig. 2).<sup>51</sup> Among the several contemporary descriptions of his portrayal, the most revealing from a technical point of view are the anecdotes that can be traced back to the singer Luigia Sandrini-Caravoglia (1782–1869) who had sung Donna Anna to his Don Giovanni in Prague in the early nineteenth century. Sandrini-Caravoglia later told her daughter about Bassi's portrayal, and she, Marie Börner-Sandrini (1808–1890), eventually wrote down and published some of her mother's stories. In an article from 1888 she offered a detailed account of what Bassi did on stage, derived from her mother's oral account, which must have been supported by dramatic facial and gestural expressions. In her memoirs, Börner-Sandrini mentions that her mother was a brilliant mimic who would sometimes copy the behaviour of others in her comic performances:<sup>52</sup>

51. See Schneider, *The Original Portrayal*.

52. On the Sandrini and the transmission of the anecdotes, see Schneider, *The Original Portrayal*, 22–24.





**Figure 2.** Medard Thönert: 'Don Giovanni performed by Signor Bassi'. Engraving, 1797. License: CC-PD.



My mother always spoke with the greatest gratification of [Bassi's] performance of that most charming of rakes, especially highlighting the contrast in Don Giovanni's behaviour towards the three female characters. With Donna Anna, Bassi's Don Giovanni thus always sported a certain kind of suppressed tenderness coupled with veneration; towards Donna Elvira, on the other hand, he always behaved as a perfect gentleman who still treats his erstwhile mistress with chivalrous charm, but who at appropriate moments clearly exhibits a certain impatience, which is always suppressed, to be sure, as quickly and prudently as possible. Towards the coquettish and rather bigoted Zerlina he behaved with that overwhelming gallantry that shows itself in all sorts of exaggerated flatteries whose meagre worth a more prudent girl soon recognises, but which this one takes at face value. – Moreover, my mother highlighted Bassi's peculiar and almost buoyant stateliness in the role in certain, even tragic, moments, e.g. already in the first scene, after the killing of the old Commendatore, to which he is virtually half compelled, however. As Don Giovanni, Bassi exhibited a sort of human affectedness and commiseration at the sad outcome of this adventure, though with a fast transition to the role's easy-going, buoyant mood at the hasty escape with his waiting servant Leporello (splendidly portrayed by [Felice] Ponziani). The performance of the final scene with the Commendatore's ghost was always magnificent. Quite unlike many other holders of the role of Don Giovanni, Bassi never displayed dread and horror at the beginning, or gave himself Dutch courage along with Leporello by drinking champagne, even attempting to threaten the ghost with the dagger and so forth. As Don Giovanni, he still utterly remained the perfect gentleman here, from whose mind fear of the spectre is quite far at first, but who rather suspects an assault on his person and therefore never lets the ghost out of his sight and clearly appears extremely annoyed by the whole scene. Here Bassi was able to darken his features in a perfect manner and splendidly suggest the increasingly eerie situation. This made the escalation magnificent at the moment Don Giovanni gives the ghost his hand, and despair finally descends on the reckless rake due to the icy coldness of the 'stone guest's' hand; his hair literally stood on end, and he writhed in horror, clasped by the ghost's powerful hand. Back then, the tragic scene ended with Don Giovanni falling lifeless to the floor (as if he had suffered a stroke) and disappearing into the ground like the ghost.<sup>53</sup>

53. Marie Börner-Sandrini, 'Eine Erinnerung an Luigi Bassi, Mozarts ersten Don Juan', *Dresdner Anzeiger* 159, no. 259 (15 September 1888), 17–18. The English translation is quoted from Schneider, *The Original Portrayal*, 61–62, 72–73, 195.

Due to the anecdotal nature of this account and its lack of references to general ‘rules’, this is the type of source that Barnett would, no doubt, have discarded. However, it contains information about eighteenth-century acting that could never be derived from the prescriptive sources on which he focused. The detailed description of the effect that Bassi’s performance had on the young Luigia Caravoglia, and even on certain highlights of his portrayal that stuck in her memory – and which must therefore have served to capture the spectator’s attention – provides valuable insights into the relationship between acting principles and dramatic effects and aims, and between spectator, character, and actor, which we must take into account if we want to develop a technical system inspired by eighteenth-century practices.

What struck Caravoglia in Bassi’s performance was his ability to capture the *uniqueness* of Don Giovanni’s character. Nothing suggests that he adhered to any stereotype, or stylised, representation of, say, eighteenth-century noblemen, or at least, this was not what captured the attention and imagination of his young colleague. Moreover, nothing in Börner-Sandrini’s account suggests that Bassi’s portrayal of this role would be difficult for us to understand or appreciate today, just as the daughter was able to appreciate her mother’s descriptions, or reenactments, in the late nineteenth century of a portrayal that had debuted one hundred years earlier. We find nothing of the exotic strangeness cultivated by Barnett, in other words. Bassi’s Don Giovanni was not a type (notably, Börner-Sandrini points to his ‘*peculiar* and *almost cheerful* stateliness’), though it might be appropriate to describe his portrayal as *idealised*, since that stateliness seems to have been maintained consistently throughout the opera (‘even in some of the tragic moments of the role’), patently at the expense of any hint of gloom, arrogance, or vulgarity. The subtle but crucial distinction between stylisation and idealisation has often been overlooked by HIP practitioners as well as by historians of late eighteenth-century theatre.<sup>54</sup>

54. On this distinction, see also Maria Gullstam’s discussion of Rousseau’s acting advice to Antoine Le Texier in the title role of *Pygmalion*, in chapter 7 of this volume, ‘Rousseau’s *Pygmalion* as Research on Stage’, 173–174.

Most notably, the effect of Bassi's portrayal on the audience was one of seductiveness and, in the scene where he dies, compassion, rather than of moral rejection. Such theatrical effects connect directly to the conception of Mozart's opera as a 'problem drama' of the late Enlightenment, in which the audience is challenged to consider moral questions, such as the interaction between the characters and the fairness of the hero's punishment.

### The finesse as a historical acting principle

As Börner-Sandrini's anecdotes suggest, the acting principles followed by actors associated with the Enlightenment reforms, such as Bassi, cannot be reduced to a formulaic system as conveniently as the figurative language of gestures can. To understand these principles, it is not sufficient to reconstruct a set of rules for gesturing; we need to approach the history of acting from an entirely different perspective.

I would like to turn to the study of eighteenth-century acting, *Classical Acting: Stable Conventions in the Art of Acting, 1700–1900* from 1975 by Danish theatre historian Svend Christiansen. In contrast to Barnett, who treated the historical acting techniques as an abstract sign system beyond any historical context, Christiansen chose to focus on theatrical conventions that were 'caused by basic acting conditions'.<sup>55</sup> And whereas Barnett treated the actor's gestures as a means of representing 'the ideas expressed by the words', Christiansen states that the actor's means will always be 'directed towards the creation of effect'.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the extent and force of these effect-actions depend on the circumstances: 'the predominant tradition, the size of the theatrical space, the type and composition of the audience, the degree of complicity with the audience, and the distance between the stage and the spectators'.<sup>57</sup> Naturally, these circumstances are often dictated by the plays performed: is the actor standing on a bare stage surrounded by flat wings, or does he find himself in a realistic environment with furniture and props? Is he alone on stage, or is he

55. Svend Christiansen, *Klassisk skuespilkunst: Stabile konventioner i skuespilkunsten 1700–1900* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1975), 8–9.

56. Christiansen, *Klassisk skuespilkunst*, 11.

57. Christiansen, *Klassisk skuespilkunst*, 11.

part of an ensemble? Christiansen describes the difference between the classical (rhetorical) and the naturalistic actor as follows:

When the actor is supposed to forget the presence of the audience, and when he is required above all to identify with a naturalistic environment, then the character will usually be revealed little by little, detail by detail. If the acting is directed towards the spectators, on the other hand, the main features of the role have to be outlined immediately.<sup>58</sup>

While the naturalistic actor is expected to refrain from improvisations, which would disturb the carefully created milieu and the developmental line of the character, the classical actor is required to capture and show the character the moment he enters the stage. The *idealising* actor of the late eighteenth century, however, stands somewhere between those two: his character does not develop in the course of the performance, he builds his portrayal on certain stable characteristics, and he may also improvise during the performance; however, his improvisations need to be contained and restricted by the general outline of the character, whereby he differs from the stylised types of, say, the *commedia dell'arte*.

Significantly, Christiansen did not see the classical acting conventions as simply obsolete, even if we rarely encounter them in the so-called 'serious' drama today. As he points out, they survive in various popular forms, such as circus, revue, and farce, suggesting that today's audience is perfectly capable of grasping and appreciating the virtues of the classical actor immediately. In some cases, these acting conventions are even reintroduced into the serious dramatic repertoire, which may astound us – because it breaks with the dominant naturalistic conventions – but may also be refreshing. For example, in Mussbach's *Macbeth*, an apron stage had been built into the auditorium, similar to the one in Shakespeare's Globe, which allowed Lady Macbeth to address the audience much more directly than is common in opera productions. It also enabled her to interact with the spectators in a playful manner during her aria. This revived theatre convention was immediately accessible to the modern spectator

<sup>58</sup> Christiansen, *Klassisk skuespilkunst*, 22.

who might otherwise associate such direct audience contact with the Berlin Kabarett, and its cynical gallows humour, political satire, and boisterous dance tunes.

A central concept in Christiansen's book is the so-called 'finesse', or 'subtlety'. In German, the concept was often translated as *Feinheit*, as when Sonnenfels refers to Bernasconi's 'feinsten Ausdruck'. This word also recurs, with the same meaning, in assessments of Bassi's acting from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>59</sup> We first meet this concept, which was of central importance to the acting ideals of the Enlightenment, in the 1747 treatise *Le Comédien* by playwright Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine. Finesses were physical actions, or vocal colourings, that the actor applied at various moments throughout the performance, and especially at emotional highpoints. While they had no direct equivalent in the dramatic text, they nevertheless showed that the actor had made a close study of the drama.<sup>60</sup> Sainte-Albine associated it with the 'truth' of the character, and it often seems to have encapsulated the character's relation to another character, in agreement with the emphasis on social drama, ensemble acting, and the spectator's empathy in late eighteenth-century theatre. Since the use of finesses had to be appropriate to the specific character in the specific situation, it could not be reduced to a conventional sign (unlike the 'movement of forcible removal' mentioned by Sonnenfels, which was *not* a finesse), and it was more difficult to turn it into a general technical rule. Consequently, Barnett ended up ignoring one of the most fundamental eighteenth-century acting principles.

Bernasconi's cry and embrace of Aspasia in act 2 of *Alceste*, and Bassi's acting in the opening scene of *Don Giovanni* are both examples of finesses. Furthermore, Bassi in *Don Giovanni* is an example of how a classical actor could draw the main outlines of his character from the very outset of the performance, instead of revealing the character little by little, as a naturalistic actor would do. With the swift transition from 'human affectedness and commiseration' to his regular 'easy-going, buoyant mood', Bassi captured Don Giovanni's peculiar mixture of intense presence and flighty carefreeness, which is

59. On dramatic idealisation and the concept of the finesse in late eighteenth-century acting, specifically with regard to Luigi Bassi, see Schneider, *The Original Portrayal*, 31–34.

60. Christiansen, *Klassisk skuespilkunst*, 102–103.

mercurial and capricious without being callous. While this transition is already suggested by the text and the music, with its transition from closed number to recitative, Bassi magnified the transition and turned it into a dramatic point. A similar finesse occurred in the supper scene where Bassi's Don Giovanni went from being 'extremely annoyed' at the encounter with the presumed assassin until finally expressing his 'despair' and 'horror' when realising that he is holding the hand of a walking statue: a change coinciding with Mozart's change of tempo from *andante* to *più mosso*.<sup>61</sup>

It is worth noting that Börner-Sandrini, who was writing about Bassi's portrayal during the period of theatrical naturalism, nowhere suggests that Bassi gave a depth to the character, or depicted a psychological development, of which there is no hint in the libretto. Bassi's Don Giovanni remained the same character from beginning to end, the variety and interest of his portrayal deriving from a series of carefully placed finesses, which took their cue from the text or the music, and by which means he revealed his relationship with the other characters. Apparently, the performer's idealising portrayal of the seducer served as a context that threw the finesses into relief.

### Mozart and Verdi our contemporaries

Truly ground-breaking productions of classics involve the rethinking of the works in their original historical context. The success of Mussbach's production of Verdi's *Macbeth* therefore involved more than a radically modern approach to the score; the contemporaneity of the performance depended on the revival of a specific vocal-dramatic practice that Verdi had fought to introduce but which had been erased from the performance tradition. As Valayre's performance showed, what must have unsettled operagoers in the middle of the nineteenth century had lost none of its ability to unsettle the audience at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Likewise, the theatrical finesses, including the use of vocal colour, was an essential means in the eighteenth century to engender

61. The tempo marking *più mosso* might itself be considered a finesse, as it is not an absolute measurement like *andante* (a walking pace), but rather depends on the situation and the tempo it modifies. Hence, its application could have implications for the delineation of character. I would like to extend my thanks to the anonymous reviewer from Stockholm University Press for this observation.

profound audience experiences: Alceste's incisive cry and Don Giovanni's sudden change of mood when he takes the hand of the Commendatore are examples of how two outstanding performers, Antonia Bernasconi and Luigi Bassi, made use of this acting principle. Moreover, since the finesse is non-stereotypical by definition, it does not require today's audiences to have any prior knowledge of historical theatre conventions. As a historical acting principle, it is just as accessible for us today as the vocal colour required by Verdi. In fact, the 'awful, embarrassing sound' made by the Andromache actress in *The Trojan Women* was also a finesse, which took the form of a particularly expressive vocal colouration.

In contrast to the stylised and generalised portrayals characteristic of Barnett's approach to historical acting, the 'cheerful stateliness' peculiar to Bassi's Don Giovanni suggests an idealised (i.e. heightened yet individualised) portrayal. This conception of the character is also what Mozart's music communicates, which explains why Bassi's dramatic expression was perceived as being seamlessly integrated with the musical expression. This conception of the role also went to the heart of the opera's general emotional impact and thereby to its social significance. The finesse of Bassi's performance served the overall dramatic purpose of facilitating the musical seduction of the audience in a manner that was analogous to Don Giovanni's seduction of the women on stage.

As Kott stresses, the theatrical experience of contemporaneity is something that happens in the encounter between the actor, the spectator, and the text. Contemporaneity is asked of the theatre and of the audience alike, and so it cannot be deliberately conceived and staged: it requires sensitivity on both parts. It requires that we approach the old plays and operas with open minds, rejecting the postmodern conception of the works as fixed representations of social values and rejecting the timeworn performance traditions of the mainstream. It is paramount that we interpret and reinterpret the works, attentively and intuitively, and that we study a broader range of sources in order to understand the historical contexts that gave rise to them.