

7. Rousseau's *Pygmalion* as Research on Stage: From Theory to Practice and Back Again

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In the Performing Premodernity project we proceeded by combining academic and artistic research, by letting practice and theory communicate while allowing for exchanges of different forms of knowledge. One of our subprojects that involved all our members was the research-based production of *Pygmalion* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). We performed it first at the eighteenth-century theatre of the State Castle of Český Krumlov in 2015, then at the House of Nobility (Riddarhuset) in Stockholm in 2015 and 2016, then at the Utrecht Early Music Festival in 2018, and finally at the Ulriksdal Palace Theatre (Confidencen) in 2019. My primary research area was Rousseau's performance aesthetics and so I acted as the producer and dramaturge of the production. Mark Tatlow was the musical director; Petra Dotlačilová was in charge of the costumes;¹ Magnus Tessing Schneider was the co-dramaturge; while Willmar Sauter and Meike Wagner functioned as expert spectators. The project also involved three associate members of Performing Premodernity: the actors and artistic researchers João Luís Paixão (*Pygmalion*) and Laila Cathleen Neuman (*Galathée*, the statue), and the acting coach Jed Wentz.²

We were attracted to *Pygmalion* partly because its genre, the *scène lyrique*, seems foreign to a modern audience. This genre was also new to the eighteenth-century spectators: Rousseau used *Pygmalion* to invent this new form of music theatre. Today *Pygmalion* is often referred to as a melodrama or monodrama.³ The dialogue in *Pygmalion* is spoken prose. This is interwoven with short instrumental interludes, or *ritournelles*, that accompany the stage actions, all of which are described in detail by Rousseau. This mixture of declamation,

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

2. For videos of the performances at Český Krumlov and at Riddarhuset in Stockholm in 2015 and in the Utrecht Early Music Festival in 2018, see the Performing Premodernity homepage: <https://performingpremodernity.com/anthology/>.

3. On the genre and its development, see Jacqueline Waeber, *En musique dans le texte: Le mélodrame de Rousseau à Schoenberg* (Paris: Van Dieren, 2005). The different names for the genre are discussed in the introduction, pp. 9–16. See also Kirsten Gram Holmström, *Monodrama, Attitudes, Tableaux Vivants: Studies on Some Trends of Theatrical Fashion 1770–1815* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967).

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4. Parts of this summary have been published, in different forms, in chapters 4 and 5 of my dissertation, *Rousseau's Idea of Theatre: From Criticism to Practice* (Stockholm University, 2020), especially pp. 169–172, 180–184, 189–193 (<https://su.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1430104/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (accessed 23 March 2023)), and in my chapter 'Pygmalion's Power Struggles: Rousseau, Rameau and Galathée', in *Rousseau on Stage: Playwright, Musician, Spectator*, ed. Maria Gullstam and Michael O'Dea (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2017), 119–137.

5. Two of the twenty-six *ritournelles* are by Rousseau. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Horace Coignet, *Pygmalion: Scène lyrique*, ed. Jacqueline Waeber (Geneva: Éditions Université-Conservatoire de Musique, 1997).

6. The following subsection largely draws on Gullstam, *Rousseau's Idea of Theatre*, 180–184.

7. 'In this century, when every effort is made to materialize all the operations of the soul and to deprive human feelings of all morality, I am mistaken if the new philosophy does not become as fatal to good taste as to virtue'. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages, in Which Melody and Musical Imitation Are Treated*, tr. John T. Scott, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, 14 vols. (Hanover NH and London: University Press of New England, 1990–2012), 7: 324–325.

pantomime, and mimetic music can appear exaggerated and almost comical to modern eyes and ears, especially as the orchestra often emphasises the movements of the characters when they display extreme emotions, such as violent rage, or deep sorrow. We wondered if it would be possible to perform *Pygmalion* in a way that remains true to Rousseau's vision and at the same time communicates well to twenty-first-century spectators.

The staging of our production was informed by 1) our study of Rousseau's theories about music and theatre, 2) our close reading of the work itself, and 3) the performance skills of the artists. Rather than finding the 'correct' way of performing *Pygmalion*, we wanted to try out various solutions to the problems it poses. In the following, I will provide an overview of the written sources on which we drew and examine how our work influenced my understanding of the piece.⁴ My emotional response to *Pygmalion* grew stronger over the years we performed it. By studying video recordings of our different performances, I will try to discover why my emotional response developed, and how the collaboration with the artists and refinements in the production helped create that effect.

A genre for the most violent passions

Rousseau's *Pygmalion* was first performed in 1770 in the semi-private setting of the Hôtel de Ville in Lyon. Rousseau had written the text in 1762, but in 1770 he persuaded Horace Coignet (1736–1821), a local musician, to set it to music, with a few shorter sections composed by himself.⁵ Rousseau had developed the theories about the relationship between language, music, and gesture that underlie the creation of *Pygmalion* over a decade earlier, in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, written in the mid-1750s.⁶ In this conjectural history of the origins of humankind, he stated that the first words or sounds uttered by humans were expressions of the passions of the soul, and that this soul, the original source of their expressiveness,⁷ had not yet

been corrupted by the human will to structure thinking and communication according to rules, systems, and formulas. He proposed that at this point in pre-history there was still no difference between language and music: 'the first discourses were the first songs'.⁸ Language and music were later separated and forced into different categories, however, due to our striving for organisation and structure, and this gradually caused language and music to lose their close relation to the human soul. This argument is repeated in various guises throughout his essay. He states about the development of language that: 'Writing, which seems as if it should fix language, is precisely what alters it; it changes not its words but its genius; it substitutes precision for expressiveness'.⁹ And about the development of musical expression, he writes that 'by thus shackling the melody, [harmony] deprives it of energy and expression, it eliminates passionate accent in order to substitute the harmonic interval for it'.¹⁰ About body language he writes: 'Ever since we learned to gesticulate we have forgotten the art of pantomime'.¹¹ These three statements follow the same argumentative structure: when linguistic, musical, and gestural expressiveness developed into written language, harmonic theory, and the language of gestures respectively, they began to be dominated by their own description.¹² Thus, the emergence of the systems that we use to describe and understand our own modes of self-expression has smothered their expressiveness. In his writings on aesthetics, Rousseau points to French opera, music, and theatre as examples of this development.¹³

These ideas were important for our project because in *Pygmalion* Rousseau deliberately detached music, language, and pantomime from one another, and then combined them in new ways.¹⁴ *Pygmalion*'s intense emotions are conveyed by his pantomimic actions and their accompanying *ritournelles*, which anticipate or follow his speeches.¹⁵ As Jacqueline Waeber explains:

The suspension points that usually begin and end the declamation of the actor, the unresolved cadential gestures that end the instrumental *ritournelles*: these gestures function as invisible sutures

8. Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, 318.

9. Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, 300.

10. Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, 322.

11. Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, 290.

12. For example, he writes that 'as enlightenment extends, language changes character; it becomes more precise and less passionate; it substitutes ideas for feelings, it no longer speaks to the heart but to reason'. Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, 296.

13. On the importance of this principle for Rousseau's theatre and music aesthetics, see Gullstam, *Rousseau's Idea of Theatre*, especially chapter 2.

14. See Gullstam, *Rousseau's Idea of Theatre*, 180–183, and Gullstam, 'Pygmalion's Power Struggles', 123. On the links between the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* and *Pygmalion*, see Waeber, 'Rousseau's *Pygmalion* and the Limits of (Operatic) Expression', in Gullstam and O'Dea, *Rousseau on Stage*, 103–115. The following parts of this subsection follow Waeber's writings on *Pygmalion*.

15. Waeber argues that 'the refusal of song' in *Pygmalion* 'should not be taken as a mere "return" to speech. It is the refusal of the artificiality of modern operatic song that has traded its expressive accent for gratuitous virtuosity. The return to speech in *Pygmalion* attempts to uncover the original vocalic emanation prior to articulated language that is at the very origin of melody, thus music'. Waeber, 'Rousseau's *Pygmalion*', 112.

between music and declamation, in order to create the illusion of a continuous discourse between both.¹⁶

In other words, the separation of music and words in *Pygmalion* really marks an attempt to reunite them. The connections between the different forms of theatrical expression were therefore central to Rousseau's vision of how he wanted it performed. At the same time, these connections also hark back to his earlier criticism of contemporary French opera. For in his works on music theory, he repeatedly emphasised the close relationship between words and music, and between pantomime and music. For example, in the article 'Acteur' in his *Dictionary of Music*, he stressed that an opera singer has to be a good actor because it is his/her task

not only to make others feel what he says himself, but also what he allows the symphony to say. The orchestra does not depict one sentiment that does not emerge from his soul: his steps, his glances, his gestures, all must constantly agree with the music, without him appearing to think about it; he must always interest us, even when he is silent and even when he is occupied with playing a difficult role; if he for a single moment forgets his character in order to take care of the singer, he is merely a musician on stage; he is no longer an actor.¹⁷

When we view Rousseau's music theory as a precursor of his *scène lyrique*, we see that such statements are more than a call for better acting in opera. He wanted the merging of music with stage action, of *melos* with *drama*, to be the basis of an entirely new form of music theatre.

Another important step in his development towards the *scène lyrique* was the *récitatif obligé* ('obligatory recitative'), which he first referred to in 1753 in his *Letter on French Music*. Later he describes *récitatif obligé* as a recitative that unites stage action with orchestral music, and which is appropriate for scenes of intense passion.¹⁸ In the *Dictionary*, it is defined as

that which, interspersed with *ritournelles* and symphonic passages, [...] forces the reciter and the orchestra towards one another, in

16. Waeber, 'Rousseau's *Pygmalion*', 113.

17. '[...] il ne doit pas seulement faire sentir ce qu'il dit lui-même, mais aussi ce qu'il laisse dire à la Symphonie. L'Orchestre ne rend pas un sentiment qui ne doive sortir de son ame; ses pas, ses regards, son geste, tout doit s'accorder sans cesse avec la Musique, sans pourtant qu'il paroisse y songer; il doit intéresser toujours, même en gardant le silence, et quoiqu'occupé d'un rôle difficile, s'il laisse un instant oublier le Personnage pour s'occuper du Chanteur, ce n'est qu'un Musicien sur la Scène; il n'est plus Acteur'. 'Acteur', in *Dictionnaire de musique*, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 5 vols. (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade: 1959–1995), 5: 637. If nothing else is indicated, translations are my own.

18. See *Letter on French Music*, in Rousseau, *Collected Writings*, 7: 167. Here, 'récitatif obligé' is translated as 'accompanied recitative'. On the *recitatif obligé*, see David Charlton, *Opera in the Age of Rousseau: Music, Confrontation, Realism* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 46–50, and Waeber, *En musique dans le texte*, 31–37.

such a way that they must be attentive to and listen to each other. These alternating passages of recitative and melody [...] are the most touching, entrancing, and energetic in all modern music. The agitated actor, carried away by a passion that prevents him from saying everything, interrupts himself, stops and hesitates while the orchestra speaks for him; and these silences, filled out in this way, affect the listener infinitely more than if the actor himself had said all that the music lets us hear.¹⁹

Rousseau is said to have introduced the term *récitatif obligé* into French, deriving it from the Italian *recitativo obbligato* (also known as *recitativo accompagnato*). In France the 'label stuck immediately'.²⁰ It is possible that he introduced this alternative name for the form that was already known in France as *récitatif accompagné* in order to claim authorship of a more dramatic type of recitative. As Waeber has pointed out, he appears to create a 'dramatic gradation' between the different forms of recitative that he lists in the *Dictionary of Music*: *récitatif*, *récitatif accompagné*, *récitatif mesuré*, and *récitatif obligé*.²¹ Listing them in this order suggests 'that the ultimate emphasis is achieved with the last definition, that of the *récitatif obligé*'.²² He believed that the orchestra should 'speak' for the singer/actor in the *récitatif obligé*, helping her/him communicate intense passions where words do not suffice. Instead of seeking a separation of words and music, though, he treats the orchestra and the singer's declamation 'as two vectors of expression of one single language that in a utopian way reunites music and speech'.²³ This is precisely what Rousseau tried to achieve in *Pygmalion*. In the *Dictionary of Music*, the *récitatif obligé* is presented as a form of operatic recitative that can be used to express intense emotions. Whereas in *Pygmalion*, the technique of alternating between the 'two vectors of expression of one single language' is applied throughout, and song is omitted completely. Although this might appear to deepen the divide between text and music, it should rather be understood as a merging of the two, through the use of pantomime.

To show how this new merging of text and music materialised in our production of *Pygmalion*, it is necessary to take a look at the

19. 'C'est celui qui, entremêlé de Ritournelles et de traits de Symphonie, oblige [...] le Récitant et l'Orchestre l'un envers l'autre, en sorte qu'ils doivent être attentifs et s'attendre mutuellement. Ces passages alternatifs de Récitatif et de Mélodie [...] sont ce qu'il y a de plus touchant, de plus ravissant, de plus énergique dans toute la Musique moderne. L'Acteur agité, transporté d'une passion qui ne lui permet pas de tout dire, s'interrompt, s'arrête, fait des réticences, durant lesquelles l'Orchestre parle pour lui; et ces silences, ainsi remplis, affectent infiniment plus l'Auditeur que si l'Acteur disoit lui-même tout ce que la Musique fait entendre'. Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de musique*, 1012–1013.

20. Charlton, *Opera in the Age of Rousseau*, 48.

21. Waeber, *En musique dans le texte*, 31–37.

22. Waeber, *En musique dans le texte*, 31. My translation.

23. Waeber, *En musique dans le texte*, 35.

dramatic content of the piece and how our understanding of its dramatic construction developed through our practical work.

The emotional curve

Pygmalion is structured around a steady flow of alternating passions that depict the emotional reality of the title character.²⁴ The sculptor's monologue about the statue of Galathée, his most beloved creation, makes up almost the entire action. Venting his doubts, his terror, and his love as he dreams about her and looks at her, Pygmalion invites the spectators into his thoughts, allowing them to experience his inner world. As spectators we cannot know what 'really' happens and what springs from Pygmalion's inner reality. When we first encounter Pygmalion, he has hidden Galathée behind a veil: he wants to unveil and admire her anew, but he is fearful of his reaction when he sees her again. When he eventually gathers sufficient courage to uncover the statue, he is struck by a series of conflicting emotions, which he expresses in a stream of consciousness articulating his deep wish to animate the stone figure through his own soul:

Such arrows of flame seem to fly out of this statue to make my senses blaze, then fly back with my soul to their source! Alas! She's still cold and motionless, while her charms set my heart on fire, as if it would leave my body to warm hers. In this delirious fever, it's as if I can fling myself out of my body, as if I can give her my life, breathe my soul into her. Oh, let Pygmalion die, to live in Galatea!... What am I saying? Heavens! If I were Galatea, I would no longer see her, no longer be the one who loves her! No, let Galatea live, and may I not be Galatea. Oh! may I always be another, so as to want to be her forever, so as to see her, love her, be loved by her...²⁵

While most of the drama centres around Pygmalion's reactions, thoughts, and feelings as to the beauty of his own creation, his wildest dreams finally come true: Galathée comes to life; she walks down from her pedestal and exclaims: 'Me!' ('Moi!').

We understood from the outset that the role of Pygmalion would be demanding for the actor, as a large part of the forty-minute drama

24. The following subsection draws on Gullstam, *Rousseau's Idea of Theatre*, 169–172, 189–193.

25. 'Quels traits de feu semblent sortir de cet objet pour embraser mes sens, et retourner avec mon ame à leur source! Hélas! il reste immobile et froid, tandis que mon cœur embrasé par ses charmes, voudroit quitter mon corps pour aller échauffer le sien. Je crois, dans mon délire, pouvoir m'élancer hors de moi; je crois pouvoir lui donner ma vie, et l'animer de mon ame. Ah! que Pygmalion meure pour vivre dans Galathée! ... Que dis-je, ô Ciel! Si j'étois elle, je ne la verrais pas, je ne serois pas celui qui l'aime! Non, que ma Galathée vive, et que je ne sois pas elle. Ah! que je sois toujours un autre, pour vouloir toujours être elle, pour la voir, pour l'aimer, pour en être aimé...' *Pygmalion*, in Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, 2: 1228. The quotations in English come from an unpublished translation by Maria Gullstam, Felicity Baker, and Magnus Tessing Schneider.

is a 'one-man show' without any opportunity to interact with other actors. As we began to perform the text, it became clearer that, to hold the attention of the spectators, Pygmalion's emotional energy could not be kept at the same high level all the time. The actor had to create a gradation, a curve of changing emotion with gradually increasing intensity. The performer of Galathée could be of no assistance as the statue remains immobile until the very end.²⁶

The play starts out with a low level of intensity. Pygmalion is in a state of depression and hopelessness. The curve of intensity rises slightly when he starts dreaming about unveiling Galathée. This is slowly heightened by several moments of suspense: he approaches the statue, then withdraws, he goes closer again and starts lifting the veil only to let it fall again, until he finally finds the courage to uncover the statue. Seeing her, he is instantly filled with intense love. But this passionate state soon gives way to growing uneasiness intermingled with eager anticipation: Pygmalion wants to make one final change to his creation and places his chisel on her body. This long hesitation before striking her with the hammer leads up to a discharge of energy. Sensing that his chisel has met human flesh rather than stone, he emits a fearful scream and lets his tools drop to the floor. He then 'steps down from the pedestal' where Galathée is placed, and this descent to the stage floor where he then stands 'trembling and confused' creates an instantaneous drop in the energy level.²⁷ His feelings of love soon return as he admires the statue, wishing 'tenderly' – and then 'even more tenderly' – that she possessed a soul that might match her perfect physical form.²⁸ Then follows a long silence as Pygmalion sits down at his table 'in a state of deep dejection', realising that he has fallen in love with a woman made of stone. But he soon climbs up the curve of intensity again: he realises, 'impetuously', that he has nothing to be ashamed of; perhaps his love is simply directed towards a being who has the same physical form as Galathée the statue?²⁹ He exclaims that he would want to give his own soul to Galathée, and he turns to the gods 'in transports of desire', asking for their assistance.³⁰ This brief moment of self-acceptance quickly gives way to

26. I do not wish to diminish the significance of the role of Galathée, however, which is demanding in other ways, as I will explain later.

27. 'Il redescend, tremblant et confus'. Rousseau, *Pygmalion*, 1227.

28. 'Tendrement'; 'avec plus attendrissement encore'. Rousseau, *Pygmalion*, 1227.

29. '[...] dans un profond accablement'. 'Impétueusement'. Rousseau, *Pygmalion*, 1227.

30. 'Transport'. Rousseau, *Pygmalion*, 1228.

‘bitter irony’, however, as the sculptor says to himself: ‘look up, you miserable wretch. Be bold! Dare to stare at a statue’.³¹ This is the moment when the statue comes to life, which first shocks Pygmalion, then fills him with terror and finally with delight.

The dramatic structure of *Pygmalion* and its performance depend on this curve of intensity. As the play lacks any verbal exchange between the two characters until the final moments, the actor must find other ways of creating the dramatic variety and tension that this might have provided. A series of contrasting passions conveyed by a codified system of affective signs would be unable to maintain the attention of the spectator for such a long time. This is the acting style that has been understood as typical of the eighteenth century, especially since the publication of Dene Barnett’s *The Art of Gesture* in 1987.³² Rousseau’s drama rather requires the actor to work the curve of intensity with emotional autonomy; it requires him to use his own sensibility to interpret and convey the role. Clues to how Rousseau expected the actor to do this in practice can be found in his ideas about the relationship between text, music, and stage action, which again reflect his criticism of humanity’s tendency to systematise thoughts and modes of communication. In 1770, the same year as *Pygmalion* was premiered, Rousseau discussed both the *récitatif obligé* and his new genre of music theatre in the *Letter to Mr. Burney*. He repeats that on stage only the combination of declamation and music can convey an intensely emotional state:

The silence of the actor then says more than his words; and these reticences, well placed and well-handled and filled on the one side by the voice of the Orchestra and on the other with the mute acting of *an actor who feels both what he says and what he cannot say*, these reticences, I say, produce an effect superior even to that of declamation, and they cannot be removed from it without removing from it the greatest part of it[s] power.³³

Here, the actor’s well-placed pauses in the declamation and his emotional involvement in the words and the stage actions emerge as central features of Rousseau’s scenic vision. This may seem obvious,

31. ‘Ironie amere’; ‘regarde, malheureux! deviens intrépide, ose fixer une statue’. Rousseau, *Pygmalion*, 1229.

32. See chapter 4 in this volume, Magnus Tessing Schneider, ‘Contemporaneity in Historically Informed Performance’.

33. Rousseau, *Letter to Mr. Burney and Fragments of Observations on Gluck’s Alceste*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, 7: 497. Emphasis added.

or even banal, to a modern reader, but if we read this account in conjunction with how Rousseau instructed the amateur actor Antoine Le Texier (1736–ca.1814) when he created the role of Pygmalion in Lyon in 1770, it turns out that the theoretical ideas about acting agreed with the directorial style of the author.³⁴ This realisation both informed our practical work with *Pygmalion* and helped me understand the development of the production over time.

Emotional autonomy, then and now

The original performance of *Pygmalion* was prepared in a short time. It took six to nine days to mount the double-bill production of Rousseau's *scène lyrique* and his one-act opera *Le Devin du village* (from 1752) at the Hôtel de Ville in Lyon.³⁵ Le Texier received the text of *Pygmalion* in an envelope on which was written: 'This work is by me; one will recognise that without difficulty. The only favour that I ask is that nothing is changed'. Rousseau appears to have followed this rule himself, Le Texier describing how the author expressed his dissatisfaction after a performance by telling the actor that: 'Ah! [...] You said "pas" in this sentence, and it was supposed to be "point"!'³⁶

According to Le Texier, Rousseau had a good sense of declamation when listening to others, though he confessed that he was not a gifted reciter himself. He refused to indicate specific tones of voice when directing the actor, insisting on letting the actor search for the right tone himself. 'I was thus forced to try out various versions before finding the one that would please him. [...] He was listening to me while sitting in his armchair and announcing my limited success with his silence'.³⁷ Interestingly, when directing Le Texier in the role of Colin in *Le Devin du village*, Rousseau seems to have put similar emphasis on the personalised delivery of the words, telling him that previous performers had merely *sung* the role 'even though I asked them to *speak* to me; because it is not music that I have created, it is *the sense of my words* that I wanted to indicate, even in my arias'.³⁸

34. Published in *Le Publiciste* in 1803. I would like to express my gratitude to Jacqueline Waeber for sharing this source with me. See also Waeber's comments on Le Texier's account in the forthcoming English translation of her book on melodrama, *The Musical Origins of Melodrama: From Rousseau to Schoenberg*.

35. See Waeber's introduction to Rousseau and Coignet, *Pygmalion*, viii–xxi.

36. 'Cet ouvrage est de moi; on le reconnoitra sans peine. La seule grâce que je demande est qu'on n'y change rien'; 'Ah! [...] vous avez dit PAS dans cette phrase, et il falloit dire POINT'. Le Texier, in *Le Publiciste* (24 thermidor an XI = 12 August 1803).

37. '[...] j'étois donc obligé d'en essayer souvent plusieurs, avant d'arriver à celui qui lui plaisoit, et qui, conséquemment, étoit le meilleur en raison de la justesse et de la finesse de son goût. Il étoit sur son fauteuil à m'écouter, et de son silence m'annonçoit mon peu de succes'. Le Texier, in *Le Publiciste* (24 thermidor an XI).

38. '[...] ils ont toujours eu la rage de me chanter, je leur demandois de me parler; car ce n'est pas de la musique que j'ai faite, c'est le sens de mes paroles que j'ai voulu indiquer même dans mes airs'. Le Texier, in *Le Publiciste* (25 thermidor an XI). Emphasis added.

On the one hand, Rousseau expected Le Texier to be faithful to the letter of his text: the difference between the negations ‘point’ and ‘pas’ is indeed minor. The author’s insistence on the correct wording hints at his interest in the musicality of language and reveals a view of the text as a poetic entity with an autonomous value in itself, and importantly, this contributes to creating the curve of intensity. On the other hand, Rousseau did not want to show Le Texier *how* to say the words: he rather expected him to make the text his own. The autonomy of the text and the autonomy of the actor were interdependent: instead of an imitation, Rousseau was looking for the actor’s individual, emotional response, his directorial style reflecting the philosopher’s search for an expressiveness that he believed we have lost due to the systems and rules prescribed by our culture.

This acting technique is reminiscent of the ‘thinking artist’ of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781): a concept launched a few years later, in 1772, in the German playwright’s tragedy *Emilia Galotti*. This meant that the rhetorical acting style, with its formalised gestures and established types, and the realistic acting style, with its imitation of nature, ceded to an idealising acting style, in which the character was filtered through the individual sensibility of the actor.³⁹ These distinctions become relevant again today, in the context of the historically informed performance which risks reproducing generalised ideas about historical theatre practices (the well-known ‘Baroque gestures’, for example), while the specific aesthetic of the individual work is forgotten. At the same time, the work’s ‘contemporaneity’ – which can bridge the gap between the old drama and the modern audience – will hardly be revealed if the performance is ‘historically uninformed’.⁴⁰

With all this in mind, we wanted to stay true to the aesthetic specificity of the piece when staging *Pygmalion*, without letting the historical contextualisation overshadow the work of art.⁴¹ Nonetheless historical performance practice and the philosophical context were

39. See Magnus Tessing Schneider, *The Original Portrayal of Mozart’s Don Giovanni* (London: Routledge, 2022), 31–32: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429281709> (accessed 23 March 2023).

40. See the chapters by Meike Wagner and Magnus Tessing Schneider in this volume, ‘On a Praxeology of Theatre Historiography’ (chapter 2) and ‘Contemporaneity in Historically Informed Performance’ (chapter 4).

41. On the concept of ‘specificity’, see Magnus Tessing Schneider’s interview with Mark Tatlow in this volume, chapter 10, ‘From the General to the Specific’.

crucial to us: the complex background of the piece was the main reason we had wanted to stage *Pygmalion*. And so, we discussed the historical sources at length with the artists involved, and decided to direct the production as a group rather than having a single director, to avoid the imposition of an artistic 'vision'. This seemed to agree with Rousseau's directorial technique (or rather, with his refusal to direct); it allowed room for the actor of *Pygmalion* to develop his own 'autonomous' conception of the role over the course of subsequent performances. If our *Pygmalion* had only been performed once, the production would have remained an interesting historical experiment, but the absence of a unifying directorial vision meant that our aim to remain true to the historical sources would have partly overshadowed the work of the imagination, causing the loss of the specificity of the work. However, this only became clear to me later as I compared the video recordings of the different performances.

Willmar Sauter describes his experience of João Luís Paixão's first performance as *Pygmalion*, at Český Krumlov in the summer of 2015:

The text was spoken in Rousseau's original French and delivered in a stylised, declamatory manner. Reading the text in a naturalistic way, as contemporary actors might do in a regular production, would probably render the passions as ridiculous, even phony. João Luís Paixão's declamation kept close to the original rhythm of each exclamation and each sentence that was uttered. At times, his delivery reminded me of recordings of Sarah Bernhardt's voice. The interplay with the short musical interludes was delicately managed by the actor and the conductor. The music emphasised the vocal delivery, preparing and extending the passions expressed by the voice and it also gave the actor the possibility to expand on the pantomimic movements that Rousseau was so anxious to describe in the manuscript.⁴²

As Sauter suggests, Paixão's acting was inspired by eighteenth-century sources relating to the art of acting, and his historically informed gestures reinforced the passions expressed by the music (Fig. 1). In this

42. Willmar Sauter, 'A Theatrophobic Dramatist: J.-J. Rousseau's Position in Theatre Historiography and on Today's Stage', in Gullstam and O'Dea, *Rousseau on Stage*, 227–253: 249.



Figure 1. Laila Cathleen Neuman (Galathée) and João Luís Paixão (Pygmalion) in *Pygmalion* by J.-J. Rousseau and H. Coignet. State Castle of Český Krumlov, 2015. Photo: Libor Sváček ©. License: CC BY-NC.

first performance, the historian in me was overwhelmed to see and hear the text complemented by the music and the gestures in a full performance of a work I had known only from reading. Returning to the video recording several years later, however, I was struck by how much Paixão's performance changed over the years. At Český Krumlov, his tone appeared grand and courtly, his gestures sweeping and almost ceremonial, and the words were directed upwards and outwards – somewhere between 'the gods' and the audience seated in the parterre.

When I compared this to the final performance, given at Ulriksdal Palace Theatre in 2019, I noticed that the 2019 performance had a generally warmer expression, and the register of passions was greater. Pygmalion's positive feelings were more developed, which made the curve of intensity more varied and alive, and nuances of his movements and facial expression gave a different flow to the performance, because the historically informed gestures and positions had become integrated into a single organic movement. The statuesque grandeur had faded away, and the lines more often seemed directed towards the actor himself, which also appeared from changes in his body language and from the lowering of his gaze. In the first performance, he mostly placed the silences that Rousseau requested between spoken sections; but at Ulriksdal, he also made small breaks within the lines, which created an inward expression closer to ordinary speech. Finally, the transitions between text and music had become more fluid. At Český Krumlov, the speeches and the musical interludes were often separated by gaps that lasted around a second, and at times Paixão's delivery sounded almost like singing when he took over from the orchestra. In the final performance at Ulriksdal, however, voice and orchestra tended to overlap for a few seconds, and the gap between verbal and musical expression was often bridged by tone and rhythm, without the actor's voice approaching song. This gave an impression of seamlessness, it being hard to say where the words ended, and the music began.

The video recordings of the performances confirm the developments that happened between 2015 and 2019. They also help explain why I was moved to tears only in the third performance, given in the House of Nobility in 2016. It was in this performance that I had the impression that the lines seemed to come from within Paixão, rather than just being delivered impeccably: the actor appeared to be one with the words and the music. Although there is no doubt that his work had developed technically by this point, as a result of his continued work on the text and his collaboration with music director Mark Tatlow, my strong emotional reaction seemed to coincide with

Le Texier's comments about Rousseau's directorial approach: the author's silent waiting for the actor to find the right tone through his own emotional experience. Paixão's own account of his process of understanding the links between music, stage action, and declamation in the role also points to the close connection between his development of technical command, and the development of what might be called his emotional autonomy:

The weaving together of pathetic expression through pantomime and through declamation, looking for the same palpitations, the same beating heart in both visual and aural impulses, has been one of the most striking realisations of this project. After performing *Pygmalion*, it became impossible for me not to notice the declamatory dimensions of other repertoire from the same period. Music has effectively come closer to speech. And because my body has repeatedly attuned itself to the movements of the passions demanded by Rousseau and Coignet, I find myself moved while listening to similar music in a way that I had not experienced before. I believe my bodily perception of music has changed irreversibly, and a certain sensibility has started to develop. Such an altered state might in turn facilitate the bringing together of declamation and music in melodrama. Declamation can then introduce the music in all its dimensions: rhythm, metre and melody.⁴³

This statement is also an example of how the artistic and the historiographical aspects of the production team's work with *Pygmalion* had become aligned, as the actor actively incorporated Rousseau's ideas about the different types of theatrical expression (text, music, gestures) into his work. The reason I was moved in the third performance was no doubt because Paixão had found a balance between the inner structure of the piece and the information from historical sources on both an emotional and a corporeal level. His emotional autonomy in relation to the piece created a balance between the striving for historical accuracy and the specificity of Rousseau's *scène lyrique*. This is not to say that we had found 'the right way' to perform *Pygmalion*; rather, we had found a direction in our work that allowed us to explore different aspects of the piece.

43. João Luís Paixão in a performance lecture with the title 'Research on Stage: Rousseau's *Pygmalion* (A Performing Premodernity Production)', presented together with Laila Cathleen Neuman and myself at a conference in Stockholm in 2018. See also the interview with Paixão and Neuman in this volume, 'Swimming in the Water of Theatrical Conventions' (chapter 9).

Galathée's silent presence

Finally, I would like to mention how the development in the performance of Galathée contributed to my understanding of Rousseau's work, even though she stood still and remained silent throughout most of the performance. In Rousseau's text, the statue of Galathée is present only in Pygmalion's words, as the object of his desire, until she comes to life in the very last moments. It is therefore difficult to grasp the power of her physical presence without having seen *Pygmalion* in performance. It was not surprising that her concluding 'awakening' would have a strong dramatic effect, but what I had not foreseen was the way my compassion for Galathée would build until this moment. While we were staging the work, it became clear that a woman standing completely still on a pedestal at the centre of the stage for thirty-five minutes is not perceived as passive. In her silent immobility, Galathée seemed to manifest herself louder and louder throughout the performance, until the moment when she says 'Moi!' This growing energy seemed to have been caused partly because Pygmalion's emotions, words, and movements all revolved around her, giving the impression that he was 'charging' her with his passions by focusing all his energy on her, and partly because of the increasing discomfort of the actress, which Laila Cathleen Neuman described as follows:

Indeed, Galathée has been one of the most difficult roles I have had to perform, both physically and mentally. The body wishes to protest, the muscles try to find different solutions to the position that they are forced into, or become so tight that moving afterwards is quite painful. Moreover, in the historical theatres, the raked stage adds to the height of the heel, putting even more pressure on the toes. I had decided to keep my eyes low, so the blinking would not disturb the public. I also decided that breathing was the only thing I would not compromise for the role.⁴⁴

In the final performance, at Ulriksdal in 2019, I could not see her trembling, blinking, or breathing at all, and it became clear to me that the stiller the actress managed to remain the more powerful the energy was that emanated from her. Paradoxically, it was only when I

44. Laila Cathleen Neuman in the performance lecture 'Research on Stage', Stockholm, 2018.



Figure 2. Laila Cathleen Neuman (Galathée) and João Luís Paixão (Pygmalion) in *Pygmalion* by J.-J. Rousseau and H. Coignet. Ulriksdal Palace Theatre (Confidencen), 2019. Photo: Eva Frykevall ©. License: CC BY-NC.

could not see her struggling that I sensed how painful and unnatural it must have felt to stand still for so long. This contributed to the mounting energy of the character, which was released when she finally abandoned her frozen state.

When Galathée has come down from her pedestal, the piece ends with the following lines:

(She [Galathée] lays her hand on him; he shivers, takes her hand and lays it on his heart, then covers it with ardent kisses.)

GALATEA (*with a sigh.*) Ah! This is me, once more.

PYGMALION Yes, dear and charming object; yes, masterpiece worthy of my hands, of my heart, and of the gods, it is you, it is you alone. I have given you my whole being. From now on, I will live only through you.⁴⁵

The dramatic structure of *Pygmalion* centres on the curves of intensity created by both characters, which reach a common point of culmination at the end of the drama. While Pygmalion's curve fluctuates upwards in waves, Galathée's increases gradually during the performance. When the two characters finally meet on the same level and symbolically unite with Galathée's hand on Pygmalion's heart (Fig. 2), a sudden calm appears. The development of the two curves of intensity is over, as is the play.

45. 'Elle pose une main sur lui; il tressaillit, prend cette main, la porte à son cœur, puis la couvre d'ardents baisers.

GALATHÉE *avec un soupir.* Ah! encore moi.

PYGMALION Oui, cher et charmant objet; oui, digne chef-d'œuvre de mes mains, de mon cœur et des Dieux... c'est toi, c'est toi seule: je t'ai donné tout mon être; je ne vivrai plus que par toi'. Rousseau, *Pygmalion*, 1228.