

## 10. From the General to the Specific: The Musical Director's Perspective

*Mark Tatlow in conversation with Magnus Tessing Schneider*

*Mark Tatlow is one of the co-founders of Performing Premodernity, and its main artistic researcher. He has worked with historically informed performance practices for many years in his career as an opera conductor, pianist, and harpsichordist. He was artistic director of the Drottningholm Palace Theatre from 2007 to 2013. The interview was conducted in October 2021.*

**Magnus Tessing Schneider (MTS):** You were the only practising artistic member of the Performing Premodernity research, which was otherwise made up of theatre scholars. Could you try to sum up what you learned or took away from working with the group?

**Mark Tatlow (MT):** I have always been interested in how opera can find its voice within today's matrix of social and existential questions. And I have always felt that using historically informed performance practices enables the music to communicate more strongly. Others in the research group, though, were more accustomed to discussing the reaction of the audience. This caused me to think more about how communicating with the audience might become part of *preparing* as well as performing opera. Many singers think this way, but it had not been a central part of my musical background and experience. At Drottningholm, I never really felt that the audience grasped the powerful ideological statements contained within the works we performed. In *La clemenza di Tito*, for example, the qualities of compassion, mercy, and *pietà* are not always taken seriously.<sup>1</sup> I wanted the audience to be confronted with the fact that it *is* possible to forgive people; and that punishment is not the only solution. Performing

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1. W. A. Mozart's 1791 opera was produced at Drottningholm in 2013 (ed.).

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Premodernity gave me the desire to use historically informed performance as a means of reaching an audience dynamically, rather than as a way of recreating historically 'authentic' results.

**MTS:** Could you tell me more about your training and early experience as a performer, and about your professional path and the choices you have made, including how you became attracted to the Early Music and Historically Informed Performance movements?

**MT:** My early training was as a pianist and organist, then as a viola player, and I became interested in Baroque music through playing in string orchestras. At school I also founded a small Baroque ensemble, which I conducted. I studied musicology at university, concentrating on the whole of music history, but finding myself once again attracted to Baroque music. I remember feeling overwhelmed when listening for the first time to the opening of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. I was about seventeen at the time and looking back I can see that this experience was an important part of my continued interest in early music, particularly in questions of performance practice. I found it exciting to hear the huge differences in recordings of early operas.

I then trained as a piano accompanist at the Royal Academy of Music, but I missed the intellectual stimulation and so as a complement to my practical studies I decided to do a Master's degree in musical analysis. I was still thinking in terms of performance, but from another angle: 'how does musical structure work on paper, as the composer wrote it down', rather than 'how does the musical structure work in time, as the performer realises it'. A friend then drew me into opera, and I trained as a *répétiteur*. After that there was no turning back. Working with opera brought together interests I didn't know I had. It combined language, theatre, teamwork, and the valuable experience of working on a wide repertoire, including of course early music. I was never attracted to pursuing the career of a 'twentieth-century conductor', because I was fascinated by too many different things.

I tried instead to choose musical environments where there was an opportunity to develop the sort of performances that I was interested in. Many of the ideas that I'm still developing today come from my time at Kent Opera and at Drottningholm. What attracted me to Kent Opera (the first company I worked with) was the fact that all the conductors there – people like Iván Fischer, Roger Norrington, and Arnold Östman – were interested in opera as a theatrical as well as a musical whole. There was a close working relationship between them and their stage directors, an approach emphasised by the vision of the founder of the company, Norman Platt. He had three tests that he applied to each opera he considered performing: 1) Could the written text be performed as a play? 2) Could the music be listened to as a concert? And 3) Could the conventions of the opera be recreated for a modern audience? Kent Opera always performed in English. We toured, and we did educational work with young people who had never attended opera before. There was a pioneering spirit in the company, and an egalitarian sense that those behind the scenes were no less important than those on stage or in the pit. All were interested in realising Platt's vision, and though the singers were excellent actors, few were international stars. At Drottningholm, where I became Östman's assistant, first working as *répétiteur* and later as chorusmaster, I found a similar attitude to the relationship between acting and singing, text and music, and to the flexibility of the music, even though there was an extra level of complexity as a result of performing in the original language.

**MTS:** As a musician who has been active for many years within the Early Music movement, you have inevitably worked with a lot of different types of historical sources. Could you tell me about how your relationship with historical sources has developed over the years, and about what types of historical sources you draw on as a performer?

**MT:** It is an ever-increasing list. Having started out by learning the basics of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century performance practice,

I gradually became interested in more specific areas and have now begun to focus on how to be informed historically about individual pieces. I began by thinking of ‘historical sources’ as what could be contained in an *Urtext*<sup>2</sup> and its critical commentary. I imagined that if I used an *Urtext* everything else would fall into place, an approach that I quickly realised was simplistic and ineffectual. Firstly, when I started working with Italian language coaches, I began to understand that the way in which you pronounce the language alters the way in which you play the music, even if the changes are very small: the colour of a vowel here, a double consonant there... Slowly but surely I realised that working on the text in this way transformed the singing, and in turn altered the way I understood the music. Secondly, when I attended a performance at Drottningholm for the first time, I suddenly understood the meaning of the word *Verwandlung*<sup>3</sup> which I had seen in my German-language Mozart scores: the transformation of the sets was visible right in front of me, and it even fitted with the music! Even now I can feel the excitement of that moment, as I realised: ‘This theatre is a historical source’. These realisations built on earlier moments too. During my training in London, a movement teacher had introduced me to other material aspects of theatrical performance, such as the relation between costume and music. And then I did a research project on Gluck in Paris, where I became interested in sources that described both how people sang and the effect of their singing on the audience. Most recently within *Performing Premodernity*, it was your work on librettos, Magnus, which contextualised my earlier interest in pronunciation. I became more interested in the ideology, the values, the notion of the uniqueness of a particular work – for example, the matter of compassion (*pietà*) in relation to *La clemenza di Tito*, which I mentioned earlier.

2. That is, a printed edition of a work of classical music, which is intended to reproduce the original intentions of the composer as exactly as possible (ed.).

3. That is scene change, literally ‘transformation’ (ed.).

**MTS:** Speaking of the Drottningholm Palace Theatre as a historical source, could you tell me some more about what you have learned about eighteenth-century performance practice from working there?

**MT:** The theatre and its stage machinery – including its sounding machinery, such as the wind machine – are not unlike instruments in the orchestra, although they contribute to the overall spectacle in a different way, creating a complex physical environment that demands a response from the performers. When singers come to work at Drottningholm, they often find that they need to choose a different set of nuances to those they use in a modern theatre. At first these seem to restrict them, for example: ‘Don’t sing so loudly! The room won’t take it!’ But the softer nuances open up areas of expression that singers seldom have the chance to explore in standard theatrical acoustics. While we were rehearsing an aria in *La clemenza di Tito*, for example, Richard Croft<sup>4</sup> – who had a great deal of experience in Drottningholm in the 80s and early 90s – said to the orchestra: ‘Look, in this theatre I can sing extremely quietly, and know I will be heard’. After demonstrating how quietly he could sing, he added: ‘You can also play that quietly!’ This was to insist on choosing a dynamic for the sake of the sound of the emotion, an emotion that required a particular dynamic – and it was the theatre that enabled it. The acoustic conditions also affect the staging, requiring the director to take account of how the sound reaches the audience; you could say that the stage picture becomes a sound picture. This is where the historical books on staging with information about the direction of the face, gestures, lighting, etc., begin to make sense as practical guidelines to enable singers to communicate with the audience. The orchestra often serves as an essential accompaniment rather than as the chief focus of attention. As conductor, I have also learned not to insist when the theatre suggests something else: I follow and see what works best. You find out where this leads and you take the consequences of what you discover; it usually gives rise to interesting and valuable artistic results. Ultimately, these are things you have to explore and experiment with in rehearsal and even in performance.

**MTS:** In the 1980s Dene Barnett drew on eighteenth-century manuals in gesturing and public speaking when he attempted to establish

4. The American tenor who sang the title role in 2013 (ed.).

his principles of eighteenth-century acting. You mention how such historical books on staging can provide ‘practical rules’ for modern performers working in historical theatres. Could you tell me about how you conceive of the relation between musical and bodily expression?

**MT:** When I went to the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis<sup>5</sup> for a few weeks in the mid-1980s to study vocal performance practice, I worked through Dene Barnett’s articles on gesture. I wanted to find out if there was a historical connection between how the music sounds, how it ‘looks’ on the page, and the gestures that were used by the singers. Some scholars locate musical meaning in sound alone, but for me the sounds create visual images that connect to the movements of the singers, and even those of instrumentalists. I find this to be particularly the case in works from the late eighteenth century. Haydn, for example, intended visual images to be evoked by his music, often in relation to the text or to the title of the composition. These images, or rather qualities of images, especially in vocal music, relate to the forms of physical gesture that naturally accompany a particular word or musical shape. I have often felt that today’s operatic singing is too undifferentiated: even individually beautiful voices tend to sound the same; maybe this is because singers do not always respond with their voice and their gesture to the particular moment, the specific word, or the explicit musical shape, but rather tend to concentrate on more general emotions.

**MTS:** You have worked with many opera directors and choreographers from within the Historically Informed Performance movement, at Drottningholm and elsewhere, particularly during the last ten years or so. You have also worked with more ‘traditional’ directors. Do you see differences between them?

**MT:** I don’t place the divide between stage directors who are ‘historically informed’ and those who aren’t. But I do feel a difference

5. The Schola Cantorum Basiliensis in Basel focuses on early music and historically informed performance (ed.).

between directors who are interested in what it means to *act* a particular moment, and those more interested in which *gesture* to add. For example, I think that in the productions of Göran Järvefelt,<sup>6</sup> historically informed movements were placed at the service of the contemporary communicative moment. This contrasts with the notion that ‘the opera will communicate better if we perform it with historical gestures since that is the way it was done at the time’. I have always looked to work with directors, performers, and musicians who see the ‘surface’ aspects of the performance as proceeding from the inner motivations of the character. In the rehearsal room I also look for a correspondence between the way in which the singers sing and move on stage and the way in which the music ‘moves’. It is possible to phrase and articulate the music in a way that aims to reflect how artists sang and moved on stage in the eighteenth century. It has to do with how they acted. In this sense, musical expression becomes a result of musical acting, just as bodily expression is a result of bodily acting, and the two are intimately connected. This is one reason why I find the art of so-called ‘concert singing’, in which ‘acting’ doesn’t figure, increasingly unsatisfactory. A singer can choose to remain still or to move more vigorously even when singing something as dramatic as Schubert’s *Erlkönig*. What is important is that in every circumstance, both body and voice are engaged in expressing the text as well as in singing the notes.

**MTS:** You mentioned earlier that your relationship with the sung text, the opera libretto, has evolved during your career. Can you tell me more about what working on specific works within Performing Premodernity caused you to realise?

**MT:** As I mentioned earlier, I have been interested in the musical declamation of words for a long time, but only recently become more interested in the quality of the libretto as a whole. A well-constructed libretto, and even the words of a particular aria, can inspire the

6. Göran Järvefelt (1947–1989) directed numerous opera productions at Drottningholm in the 1980s (ed.).

dramaturgical instincts of the composer. Composers seem to write better music when they work with a well-constructed libretto. Our study of specific works within Performing Premodernity – such as Cimarosa’s *Il matrimonio segreto*, Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito*, Gluck’s *Paride ed Elena*, Morandi’s *Comala*, and the arias written for the original performer of Don Giovanni, Luigi Bassi, by composers other than Mozart – made me realise that the musical formulation of the composer’s ideas is completely dependent upon the words and structure of the libretto. I find this important because it is the opposite of how such repertoire has often been taught. ‘Listen to the music first, learn the melody, and then put the text to it’. It made a huge impression on me when I heard Barbara Bonney say in a masterclass that she never listened to a song or aria before she had analysed the text and learned it by heart. Only then did she listen to the music to find out what the composer had done with the text. This is to follow how composers work: they read the text, speaking it, and trying to understand it before writing the music. Singers of the past too would have read the libretto first, often because the music had not yet been written! When they then received the music there may have been some wonderful moments of surprise: ‘Wow, there is so much more in this text than I had realised!’ Singers were then free to add their own nuanced understanding of the words by ornamenting them or employing special vocal colours.

**MTS:** And this takes us back to the communicative aspect of opera...

**MT:** It is often said that opera is a hybrid, consisting of different elements. But in the theatre, I believe you should experience it as a unity, not just as a piece of music with other things added. The performers should encapsulate the meanings they wish to communicate with the audience in a rich, moment-by-moment flow. As I have implied, I was taught to work on the words last. The director seldom discussed the pronunciation and precise meaning of the words: that was



**Figure 1.** Mark Tatlow rehearsing at the Drottningholm Palace Theatre. Photo: Bo Ljungblom ©. License: CC BY-NC.

the role of the language coach. Within *Performing Premodernity* I learned that the words really are a central part of the way the eighteenth-century repertoire was both put together and performed. Since leaving Drottningholm, I have tried this out in a completely different context, on classes of late-teenage music students from Musikskolan Lilla Akademien in Stockholm.<sup>7</sup> In my lessons, we regularly study the text and its translation before we listen to the music of a song or an aria. We ask simple questions such as: How might a composer set this text? Major or minor key? Slow or fast? Duple- or triple-time? What images in the text do you think the composer might have used? When we finally listen to the original music there are always some who say: ‘But how could the composer have written *that?*’ Or: ‘That was amazing! I would never have thought of that solution!’ Immediately, they are thinking creatively as a composer would, and responding to the text idiomatically rather than simply accepting what’s on the page. Their next step is to understand that the composer presents the

7. <https://lillaakademien.se/gymnasium> (accessed 23 March 2023).

performer with a first interpretation of the text, and the performer needs to grasp this before adding his or her own interpretative insights to further enrich the performance. The challenge is to learn how to move from a general to a more specific and personal interpretation.

**MTS:** And that takes us finally to the question of the ‘uniqueness’ of the work...

**MT:** In our discussions within *Performing Premodernity* I was concerned to try to define the common style of late eighteenth-century music, whereas you often spoke about the concept of uniqueness. And the more I have thought about this, the more I agree with you. It is all about trying to move away from the general towards the specific. For example, to move away from the stock stylistic features that concern the basis of singing in duple- or triple-time, how to use *portamento*,<sup>8</sup> how to perform an *appoggiatura*,<sup>9</sup> etc. towards an understanding of how each of these features can enrich a particular context. Working on these things builds an expressive toolbox that can be used in ways that are unique for each musical moment.

8. That is, to carry the voice from one note to another (ed.).

9. That is, a note that leans on the penultimate, stressed syllable of a word (ed.).