Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series VIII: Performing Arts • Vol. 16(65) Special Issue – 2023
https://doi.org/10.31926/but.pa.2023.16.65.3.13

Facial Expression in Italian and French Opera Acting at the Turn of the 18th and 19th Centuries: Perspective of the Encyclopedic Sources

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Abstract: *The expressive qualities of acting in opera – both French and Italian – in the 18th century were highly valued. My analysis will include comments made on this subject by J.J. Rousseau in his famous "Dictionnaire de musique", followed by other encyclopedists of the late 18th and early 18th/early 19th centuries, especially French. Although it was agreed that correct singing technique was a sine qua non condition for performing an opera role, meeting this condition was only the beginning of a difficult path, the aim of which was to express affect using various stage means. I will show that the facial expression recommended to opera actors aimed primarily at presenting values consistent with bourgeois ethics and aesthetics derived from sentimentalism, in line with the new direction of development of opera theatre in social life, especially in France.*

Key-words: *opera theatre, facial expression, acting, music dictionary, 18th century opera, 19th century opera*

1. Introductory remarks

An issue that has always been extremely important for the opera theater has been establishing the relationship between vocal efficiency and sensitivity and the stage and acting skills of the singer. The theoretical literature of the 18th century was, of course, full of opinions on this subject. One of the most outstanding authorities on singing in the first half of the century, Pier Francesco Tosi, said:

> I don't know if a great singer can also be a great actor, because a mind divided between two different activities at the same time will probably gravitate towards one rather than the other. However, since it is much more difficult to sing well than to act well on stage, the advantage of the former outweighs the

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> latter. But what happiness would it be for the person who possessed both of them equally! (Tosi 1723, 97).

This pious wish, expressed by an excellent teacher, was probably the result of his many years of personal experience. A similar opinion was expressed by an outstanding theoretician and critic of 18th century art, Francesco Milizia: "singing is such a difficult art and requires so much study and commitment that it is difficult to hope that a great singer could be [at the same time] a great actor" (Milizia 1744, 65). Nevertheless, complaints about the fact that both skills rarely coexist in one performer appeared sporadically in critical commentaries of the era (Hiller, 2004: 159, 169, 174). The terrible actor was supposed to be the legend of mid-century vocalism, Carlo Broschi *detto* Farinelli, which, however, did not prevent him from making a spectacular stage career (Lisecka 2018, 73–86).

This doesn't mean that singers were not subject to extensive requirements regarding the art of acting, not only in French, but also in Italian singing manuals – even though contemporary theoreticians had no illusions about the level of performance of Italian performers. Rameau wrote that a singer in an opera theater should represent an extremely versatile acting, combining the values of "beautiful sound, flexibility of the voice, musicality, charm, and feeling that must be faithfully conveyed through taste, gesture and facial expression." (Rameau 1760, 15). Of all the qualities of a good actor, Rameau particularly emphasized the last one, i.e. the ability to convey feelings through gestures and facial expressions (ibidem, 20). In the second half of the century, another famous singing teacher, Giovanni Battista Mancini, wrote, among other things, about the need for the singer to properly understand the text and the affects contained in it, to properly master the literary Italian language and appropriate pronunciation, and to properly recognize the history of the character being played. According to Mancini, a number of additional skills should be required from the singer, such as diction and recitation, but above all, knowledge – including grammar, rhetoric and broadly understood history (Mancini 1777, 218–219, 221–225, 236, 239–247).

The values of opera singing, and the roles played by the person singing in the opera were considered differently in dictionary discourse than in professional texts on vocal techniques. The authors of the latter addressed their comments to performers and their intention was primarily didactic. Dictionary creators, as we already know, rarely wrote to professional musicians, but were interested in a much broader picture: the complex whole of opera issues, along with the accompanying spectrum of aesthetic and social problems.

2. Singing, Acting and their Mutual Relations in Encyclopedic Discourse

Affect and the way of expressing it were treated as the basis for this realization, which was initiated by Rousseau, this time exceptionally consistent with his most important adversary. Like Rameau, he calls an opera singer simply an actor from whom much more is required than from an average dramatic actor (Rousseau 1768, 25–26) The theoretician remarks mercilessly: "there is nothing more unbearable and disgusting than the sight of a hero in a fit of the most vivid passions, embarrassed and ashamed of his role, tormenting himself and behaving compulsively, like a schoolboy repeating a lesson incorrectly" (Rousseau 1768, 26). The following words of the author of *Dictionnaire de musique* prove how much different the opinion of a music aesthetician is from the opinion of a singing theoretician:

> It is not enough for an opera ACTOR to be an excellent singer if he is not also a great pantomime artist; […]. His steps, his appearance, his gestures, everything must constantly match the music, but without paying special attention to it. He must always be interesting, even when he is silent, and even though he is engaged in a difficult role – if he allows himself to forget about the character even for a moment to focus on the singer – he will become merely a musician on the stage. He will stop being an ACTOR" (ibidem, 26–27; Castil-Blaze 1821, 18).

As a positive counterexample of such an attitude, Rousseau points to Claude Louis Dominique de Chassé de Chinais – a bass working at the Paris Opera, whose nobility of gestures and elegance of playing Jean-François Marmontel compared to the most outstanding works of painting and sculpture, at the same time suggesting that this performer studied them in order to obtain the appropriate stage effect (Charlton 2013, 42; Weller 2008, 85). This suggestion of a connection between operatic acting and the aesthetics of representational visual arts will also be systematically developed in dictionary discourse.

Although the correct singing technique is a *sine qua non* condition for performing an opera role, meeting this condition is only the beginning of a difficult path aimed at expressing affect using various means (Suard 1791, 46r–47v). Action – as Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard reminds us – serves to imitate affects in a work. Suard further notes that it would be "completely useless, but also very inconvenient, to take interesting and tragic actions as the subject of an opera if we did not at the same time try to convey to the spectacle all truthfulness" (Suard 1791, 50v). Pietro Gianelli also writes about an opera singer primarily as an actor who, "beyond ordinary features," must have "a pure voice, proper intonation and

touching expression, given by nature" He should also have appropriate musical knowledge. The Italian theorist, in turn, believes that "nothing is as disgusting and detracts from a good effect as listening to and watching an actor unsure of his expression and cold towards the action" (Gianelli 1830a, 114).

The principle of imitation, implemented through acting, was supposed to enable a person in the audience to empathize with the affects of the heroes and heroines, and at the same time systematize them (the foreground should include the feelings of the characters who are key to the development of the action) and evaluate them not only in terms of aesthetics, but above all everything ethical. However, even Batteux, quite radical in his concept of mimeticity, admitted that although imitation in art is, in principle, faithful copying, in practice the artist imitates not so much nature itself, but rather its idealized and restructured variant, created in his own imagination (Coleman 1971, 94–96). Also Nicolas-Étienne Framery, who, in accordance with Batteux's idea, sets the limits of imitation between accuracy and freedom (Coleman 1971, 96), instructs the potential singer that the emotion he or she experiences should not "lose any of its precision, sweetness and purity" He then calls for a kind of noble study of acting at the level of singing itself:

> animated by violent passion […] all the feelings are trying to tear themselves out of your chest at the same time. Be careful not to let their haste disturb the regularity of the meter, protect yourself from real crying that directs the voice. Let your sighs be steady; your harmonious sobbing; may your accent never become a wail. Remember that you are singing, that the air is an imitation and that the imitation must approach nature without itself being nature ((Framery 1791a, 79v).

Suard goes even further and modifies the thought of the Roman poet, pointing out that one of the most important advantages of opera acting should be the ability to imitate affects that are not felt in reality, based on intelligence, taste and what the theorist calls

> the liveliness of the soul that makes him [the actor] susceptible to all sensations of pain and joy, hope and fear, love and hatred. Let him finally have that elasticity, that suppleness of body, which enables him to quickly assume the forms and make the external modifications which true passions produce in the parts of the body of those who are really imbued with these passions (Suard 1791, 47).

Referring to the same example given by Rousseau, he remarks in passing that de Chassé, whom he praised so much, was otherwise a terrible singer, "but in opera you can be a bad singer and an excellent actor" (Suard 1791, 46r).

Suard emphasizes that the problem of combining acting with singing is practically unsolvable: it is simply impossible to play without making body movements that disturb the perfection of singing (ibidem). Pierre-Louis Ginguené also wonders how to implement all the gestures provided for in the role without "constantly replacing singing with screaming" (Ginguené 1791, 390v). In this situation, Suard suggests a method of reasonable compromise: "determining to what extent and on what occasions the vocal effect must be sacrificed for the sake of acting, and the acting effect – for the sake of singing" (Suard 1791, 50v).

Excessively making the vocal part more difficult leads to neglecting what is much more important in opera than singing technique. Suard particularly regrets the fact that the Parisian performers he knows don't have time to study the art of acting because purely musical challenges burden their profession too much (Suard 1791, 48v). As a glorious exception, he points to Antoinette Saint-Huberti, soprano of the Paris Opera, praised in the operas of Gluck, Piccini, Sacchini, Cherubini and Grétry. The theoretician also doesn't spare Italian singers on this occasion. However, the authors didn't pay much attention to the latter when it came to the issue of opera acting, because, as a rule, in the Italian *opera seria* the goal was brilliant performance, and therefore the realization of affects had to consist in something other than theatre acting. As Suard observed,

> in Italy, where […] the dramatic effect of *opera seria* remains completely unknown, composers, like the audience, only look for the beauty of the music, and as a result, the singers don't engage with the theatrical action during the performance. As soon as they have to sing an air with any effect, we see them approaching the edge of the ramp, their bodies straight, their heads raised, their faces turned constantly towards the audience. They avoid making movements of the head and body, which would distract the direction of the voice and breathing, disturb the roundness and purity of the sound, and finally destroy those delicate nuances, precision of coloratura, evenness and accuracy in intonation, which constitute the perfection of an air. This perfection is admirable in a concert, but it would be absurd to look for it in the theatre (Suard 1791, 50v).

The dispute, traditionally fought over the superiority of text over music in opera, although theoretically usually resolved in favour of words, had no real impact on performance practice. According to dictionary authors, it came down to proper

vocal expression. The opera affect was born from the voice alone – that is, as it were, at the starting point of opera acting.

French theorists were particularly sensitive to the issue of expression. Framery notes disapprovingly that French opera singers have a habit of distorting the text, and that they do so almost deliberately: "most of our French singers, believing that they are imitating those of Italy, neglect the legibility of the words, often mutilated – because of their failure to understand, as you can guess" (Framery 1791b, 98). What is even worse, according to the theorist, on their side are contemporary composers who, although it is hard to believe, recommend the lack of proper articulation of the text as a virtue. Meanwhile, "the most beautiful air, the words of which we don't hear, is merely a vocal sonata, and in vain would a musician want to express his feelings if we can judge them only on the basis of incomprehensible sounds" (Framery 1791b, 98r).

3. Collaboration between the Performer and the Composer's Intention

Another important problem regarding performance is the correct understanding of the composer's intentions by the singer and full cooperation on the part of both participants in this musical conversation. This requirement is completely obvious and requires no comment. However, both theorists also postulate that the singer should concentrate, firstly, on the dramatic potential given by the composer to the opera character built in the libretto, and secondly, on the way in which they create this character (Rousseau 1768, 215; Castil-Blaze 1821, 230).

Gianelli made a lot of comments on this subject. In the entry *Attore* he states: "an actor must be […] subordinated to the composer and poet, he is not allowed to add, remove or change anything, and a certain freedom is only granted to someone who not only knows how to use the voice, but also perfectly understands music and poetry" (Gianelli 1830a, 114). Elsewhere he recommends:

> the singer is not allowed to change the notation too much, because it shouldn't be sung the way anyone likes it – horror of horrors! Singing in [appropriate] manner means singing with feeling, with soul, stabilizing and shading the voice and expressing the true character of the composition. […] In airs, the singer must be committed to the passion he wants to arouse in the audience; to diversify and decorate music, but not to change its essence and not to seek anything other than lively expression and a beautiful imitation of nature (Gianelli 1830b, 89, 93).

Framery, however, assesses this contemporary operatic practice from a completely different perspective:

> finally, singers are not allowed to diversify the composer's ideas; it's a matter of convention. In Italy, the composer writes a very simple cantabile because he assumes that the singer has enough taste and enough knowledge of harmony to adequately fill this blank canvas. In France, where there are reasons to rely less on the singer's skills, we don't let him do anything. […] What is the result? That in Italy a singer is able to develop broader talents, and that the audience's diverse pleasures include the fact that they simultaneously appreciate the imagination of the composer and the virtuoso. It's the other way around in France: the singer is just an ordinary performer, and the listener always hears the same thing, namely what is written [in the score]" (Framery 1791d, 204v).

As the statements quoted above show, the freedom that is granted to singers, to a more or less limited extent, concerns primarily stylistic issues (for example, vocal ornaments), and not operatic acting. Since Italian vocalism, as already mentioned, was considered better than French, Framery gives the Italians a greater right to interfere with the musical text than the French. However, he notes critically that Italian opera performance is almost always the result of an orientation towards shallow virtuosity and competition in singing. Framery adds that although the French style of singing has traditionally been more restrained in terms of decorations, in recent years (i.e. in the last decades of the 18th century) it has become more and more similar to the ubiquitous and pan-European Italian manner (Framery 1791c, 181v).

As a glorious exception to the rule, Framery points to the outstanding haute-contre tenor Pierre Jélyotte, whom Joseph de Lalande already remembered with nostalgia as a retired artist in the late 1760s (Cyr 1977, 292). Few of the readers of the *Encyclopédie méthodique* edited by Framery had a chance to remember this performer, who debuted in Rameau's operas in the 1730s. Some names, important for the history of theater at that time, permanently entered the canon of opera performance, but it seems highly probable that they were known primarily to people studying musical practice – perhaps their students or students of students who read specialized singing textbooks and vocal treatises. The average reader of the dictionary had no knowledge of what Jélyotte's praised voice, described by the authors in only superlatives, actually sounded like.

However, it seems quite obvious that creating a vision of an ideal opera singer was much easier by telling stories about the sounds of voices that have irretrievably disappeared from opera halls than about the voices of real-life singers

and vocalists known to audiences and filling contemporary stages. This allowed for a kind of mythologization of the voices of famous performers who, although not yet forgotten, were irrevocably silent. In this way, the authors of musical dictionaries, while building a vision of the ideal opera, at the same time made credible the possibility of achieving the horizon of utopia by constantly referring to the myth of the great artist of the long-gone golden age of art.

4. Mimicry in the Opera Theater as a Mean of Expressing Feelings

In his reflections on physiognomy, Peter Lichtenthal focuses primarily on the issue of the stage presentation of affects, the recognition and correct interpretation of which is the main task of both the composer and the actor (actress) (Lichtenthal 1826, 24). "Of all the qualities – writes the theorist – that are required of a singer, especially in the theater, this is the most necessary, the most important, the one that provides the desired effect to the highest degree, and at the same time the most dangerous for those who cannot deal with it intelligently" (Lichtenthal 1826, 34–35).

In the theater of the time, the dim lighting of the stage dictated the manner of acting, which focused on gesture and body movement rather than on facial expressions. Theatrical accounts from the time of Dizionario e bibliografia della musica provide examples of commentary indicating that the introduction of gas lighting on stage was considered a truly significant improvement in viewing comfort. However, even in Paris – one of the most technologically advanced cities in Western Europe – it didn't become widespread until the middle of the 19th century (Clayson 2016, 17, 33). The physiognomy of affect, focused on exaggerated expression, remained an absolute necessity in the theater, where the task of distinguishing one actor from another, or one dancer from another, was often very difficult.

The authors of the *Encyclopédie méthodique*, such as Suard or Ginguené, argued that facial expressions, gestures and stage movements create a set of signs that enable emotions to be communicated in an orderly manner and on a par with sound. Suard calls this collection "natural language", understanding by naturalness freedom of expression, commonness and universality of experience and immediacy: "it's a natural language and independent of any convention; comprehensible to all people because it is common to all of them, and its expressions, combining with linguistic concepts, refine and strengthen the message of the latter" (Suard 1791, 47v.). There is an affinity with Condillac's thought, for whom the "language of gestures" is a kind of "proto-language", rooted in the most intimate and primal expression shared by humanity. Condillac, moreover, perfectly explains the transposition of this "language" onto the theater stage – the repetition

of "proto-linguistic" gestures generates specific schemes of meaning. Gestures freeze into fixed patterns, and these are then recorded in acting manuals, in the form of graphics, instructing how to convey particular passions, so that the recipients immediately identify and classify them appropriately.

But Suard, contrary to Condillac, calls this "proto-language" free from convention – a statement at least debatable, considering how highly conventionalized was the language of emotional expression, rooted in sentimentality. However, people wanted to believe – and this is what Suard's statement says – that this expression is an manifestation of the most personal experiences and sensations. Quoted in the *Encyclopédie méthodique* Charles Pinot Duclos says similarly: "These signs [referring to mimic changes] may be more or less intense, more or less distinct, but they form a universal language for all nations". He then adds: "the same signs of affection, passions, often have distinctive nuances that indicate different or opposing feelings" (Pinot Duclos 1791, 405v).

Suard also points out that the same affects, stimulated to the same degree, do not, however, manifest themselves in the same way in every physiognomy. The actor' task is therefore to feel in detail how much energy and feeling should be put into imitating the physiognomy of the character he creates. For this purpose, intelligence and taste are necessary (Suard 1791, 47). However, as the co-author of *Encyclopédie méthodique* complains, these are often lacking in contemporary performers, which results in absurd stage overexpression:

> This movement in the gaze and in the features can be well directed only thanks to the ability to penetrate inside the feelings that one wants to express: facial expressions will then respond by themselves to this momentary transformation of the actor's soul. But the ability I'm talking about is the least common talent of our actors, many even consider it an invention. They think that to express pain, anger and contempt, you have to make desperate movements with your eyebrows, mouth and eyes, and they do. But for the sake of effect, these studied gestures almost always turn out to be exaggerated and distorted (Suard 1791, 47r).

He reflects similarly on Ginguené's native opera theater: "the false action fever and exaggerated gestures that dominate our theaters are some of the main reasons that make this mania incurable in opera" (Ginguené 1791, 390v). A dozen or so years later, Lichtenthal describes the practices of Italian opera actors who fill the whole stage themselves, multiply gestures, screams and move with abruptness that doesn't cause the slightest impression" (Lichtenthal 1826, 35).

The face and its facial expressions were a particularly appreciated, but at the same time most often criticized, medium of acting. Analyzing the problem of melody (this time, surprisingly, without prior reference to Rousseau's thought), Jérôme-Joseph de Momigny uses the following metaphor: "MELODY is to the accompaniment what the face and head are to the rest of the body. Since it's through the physiognomy that the soul shows itself most clearly, it's in the main MELODY, which is the physiognomy of music, that what the soul experiences is most deeply expressed" (de Momigny 1818, 117v). This metaphor explains to us a general feature of the understanding of melody in the French musical aesthetics of the late 18th century: its primary importance in relation to the other elements of a musical work in the classical and pre-romantic style. It was the "face" of the composition; in it, as in a mirror, the feelings and affects mediated by the person of the actor or actress were reflected. The center of this most important place of expression was to be the eyes, which, as Suard recalls, Cicero in *De oratore* called the mirror of the soul (Suard 1791, 47r). An opera actor or actress, therefore, "must have above all a lively physiognomy and eyes in which all the feelings of the soul are clearly reflected" (Suard 1791: 47r–48v). Suard describes the exemplary process of playing the role on the example of David Garrick, whom he claims to have watched many times while

> […] he would withdraw to the sidelines, look into himself, fill himself with the ideas and feelings he intended to express, and then appeared with a face on which the disposition of the soul of the person he was taking was reflected as in a mirror. He spoke, his voice taking on all the accents; he paled and blushed as he wished. His eyes were misty, full of tears, flames shooting out of them. His features changed without ever being distorted, and his body movements matched with admirable harmony the accents of his voice and facial expressions (Suard 1791, 48v).

The choice of Garrick as a model actor is quite obvious (although again distant in time), as according to many contemporary sources, not only British, he remained the greatest actor of the era, and his famous ability to "feel" the role was praised by Diderot, among others (Mangan 2013, 221–223). He was known primarily for his exceptionally expressive face and perfect voice (Howard 2010, 12).

Let us note that for Suard the whole process of acting traditionally begins with the face, which in Garrick's quoted characterization irresistibly resembles patterns of mimic gestures from treatises on physiognomy, even though Garrick

was supposed to represent a completely different, extremely natural and individualized style of performing (ibidem, 14, 16–17). Even if the colors of the face – especially white and red, which testify to the affects – were obtained in the 18th-century theater with a lot of powder, rouge and lipstick (Percival 1999, 147), it was still the face that was the basic determinant of the emotional credibility of the game. In this way, the 18th-century theater reveals its perverse paradox: through a face-mask covered with cosmetics, it reveals what in a civilized society should usually remain covered with a facade of manners and sophistication. The more civilized a society, as Claude-Henri Watelet, the author of *L'art de peindre* (1760), assessed, the tighter the mask of social conventions (Smyth 2011, 35). As observed by Lavater, human physiognomy in the form of uncontrollable grimaces, twitches, changes of color sometimes incidentally reveals "cracks" in this social façade (ibidem, 42–43). The essence of acting is therefore the constant capture of these "cracks" and processing them into a conventionalized language of affects.

In the 18th-century theater, gestures were subject to a strict hierarchy: the most important was the expression of the eyes, followed by the movement of the face, head, hands, feet, and finally the voice (Solomon 1989, 552). It should be noted that some 18th-century theorists reserved the concept of gesture in the opera theater exclusively for the movement made by the hands (Planelli 1772, 160). The order of gestures quoted above also applied to 18th-century ballet (Nye 2011, 87–88). In the case of opera, as we already know, this order seems to be somewhat disturbed due to the lack of precision in clearly defining the place of the vocal in the acting, but the authors of the dictionary agreed that the facial expression is its fundamental component – as Suard wrote, "the most interesting element of theatrical action" (Suard 1791, 48r).

5. Conclusions

According to source analyses, facial expression was really high on the list of affect-creating factors in the opera theater at the turn of the and18th and 19th centuries. Even the objectively poor conditions of stage technology did not prevent this. The gesture and voice followed the mimicry, but it was the singer's face that reflected the theatrical unity of the arts and the moral tone of the opera theater, which was then no longer an aristocratic theater and was about beginning to become a bourgeois one.

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