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# Music and Embodied Action In Opera

## *A Reflective Practitioner Dialogue*

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**Abstract:**
How can we talk about musico-dramatic methods and models for operatic acting, and how do these relate to other kinds of acting? Observing the tendency of operatic professionals and pedagogues to import concepts and ideals from theatrical and cinematic practices with non-operatic application of music, we reflect upon what possibilities and problems this discursive choice instils. Interestingly, while operatic practice predates many of the acting schools influencing opera today, there is an apparent lack of documented genre-specific and singer-centered methodology related to operatic acting. This observation has instigated a mutual exchange of reflections in parallel with our respective practical endeavors. As operatic practitioners, we come from similar backgrounds as trained opera singers in the classical tradition, but with different explorative approaches as artistic researchers in music drama. In our view, a musico-dramatic acting methodology needs to address the core aspects of operatic acting. These aspects concern performative and interpretative as well as operative and cognitive skills. Turning our attention to the same issue from different positions has highlighted both common ground and the need for further development. By displaying the core arguments of our dialogue in annotated and recited form, we hope to raise new questions and ideas about musico-dramatic performance.

**Keywords:** opera, drama, action, acting, singer, performance, discourse, methodology

**The following presentation is an elaborated and annotated reenactment based on an email conversation that continued for about a month in early 2024. The immediate aim of the paper is to propose a working problem formulation and practice-led research questions concerning operatic acting. Following this, it serves as a point of departure for upcoming inquiries into the methodology and discourse in professional and pedagogical opera productions.**

**The two researchers reenacting their dialogue are both trained as professional opera singers. Furthermore, both have several years of experience as teachers and supervisors in higher opera education. However, during the last decade, they have specialized in alternative formats of music drama, enabling different tools and situations for them as artist-researchers.**

**While Sara Wilén (SW) explores how performative perspectives on opera improvisation could expand the working role and artistic identity of the opera singer (2017), Hedvig Jalhed (HJ) investigates how ludic features in immersive and interactive opera can impact perception and performance to open up new perspectives (2022). Their respective approach brings two sides to the table: One highlights the singer's scope for initiative and influence concerning other collaborators, and the other emphasizes the singer's technical system awareness and the importance of multisensory orientation.**

# *The Issue:*

How can we talk about musico-dramatic methods and operatic acting techniques in singer training?

**SW:**

When attending some student auditions I have reflected on some questions. One of them is: Where, how, and when is the choice of reading style and embodiment introduced in the singers' study process for an operatic role? Perhaps, the structure of study hasn't been analyzed thoroughly enough when it comes to particular actions in relation to music and text? There is a huge problem if directors are trying to impose reading styles retroactively, too late in the process, on parts that are already grounded in the singer's trained performance. Could repertoire opera productions be planned in other ways, creating space for the singers to participate more actively in the reading of the work?

**HJ:**

I don't know about you, but when I was an opera student about 15 or 20 years ago, there were few systematic and explicit discussions about different acting techniques and theoretical frameworks representing various acting traditions. We did a lot of acting, but as a practitioner I felt I was denied some theoretical awareness.

However, many opera students whom I meet today are often quite influenced by a particular acting school that happens to be promoted and taught in the study environment. They are clearly more aware of a special discourse and system, but at the same time, they are lacking broader knowledge. Most importantly, a discussion about what alternatives there are for opera depending on your artistic purposes and aims is often lacking.

It is furthermore common that opera students ruminate over stage directors' expectations connected to ideals of non-operatic acting schools. This points to the dire need for methods and structures for orienting opera students in dramatic theories with and without operatic application.

**SW:**

I believe the use of methods from what is known as realistic acting is a somewhat "tacit norm" for singers. In my work as a performer, researcher and teacher, I have observed that even though some methods and concepts from non-operatic acting are useful for singers, there are always moments in an opera scene where these tools don't suffice.

## Realistic Acting

**Following Fischer-Lichte (2008), in realistic acting the actor aims to transform her body "into a 'text' that consists of signs for the emotions and mental states that build a character" (p. 78) in order to convey the true meaning of the work. This approach is closely connected to the concept *mimesis*, which has dominated Western art through history. Mimesis, as Aristotle (1961) put it: man seeks to imitate nature to achieve knowledge. Aristotle's view that the right actions chosen on stage which communicate universal values is being highly contested, for example, by the feminist theorist Elin Diamond (1997), who claims that every performance conveys contextualized political and aesthetic values.**

**HJ:**

Philosopher Susanne Langer (1953) highlights that in an opera, the music is based on a dramatic play that as a libretto has been eroded to outsource aspects to the music. Operatic music can then symbolize material, social, and psychical objects in the operatic drama and inform both singers and audiences about the subjective state of the characters in a more transparent and clear way than realistic drama with psychoanalytic layers and subtext. Langer emphasizes how operatic music assimilates what in other artforms would be expressed verbally or visually, without erasing the verbal or visual dimensions. An implication of this arrangement is that neither operatic text nor operatic staging cannot be performed in a free-standing manner, without the music, in any meaningful way. They are dependent upon musical elaboration and perspectivization, and the performer who syntheses all three dimensions must balance this interdependdency while resisting the temptation to explicate in words or action what is embedded into the musical composition. Students must become aware of such mechanisms and avoid redundant information. Furthermore, Williams (2015) alleges that "[t]he specific demands that opera makes on the actor are still relatively unexplored"(p. 443) and suggests that in opera, realism must be combined with minimalism to be effective.

**SW:**

Doulton (2023) describes operatic verism as the most notable example of realism in opera, based on what he calls the "dramatic [...] verisimiltude-by default," a kind of staged realism deriving from film. Puccini's veristic operas such as *La Bohème* and *Madame Butterfly* are typical examples, where "the actor is supposed to more or less inhibit their character, in the belief that by more or less sharing the same mental space as the being they represent, they will create a more verisimiltude-realist depiction, reconstructing the internal (and thus external) world of the character."(Doulton, 2023, n.p.) But, following Betzwieser (2015), why would then spoken theatre be subject to logicality in communication? This is the vantage point of every discussion of verisimilitude in stage performance, even though in these post-dramatic theater times this is rarely the case.

Realistic acting is relevant in many ways, but we must acknowledge some basic differences between embodied action in song and speech. According to Betzwieser, the singer's vocal lines are often intertwining "outer and inner plots" in terms of the course of events and the character's emotional reactions to them, resulting in leaps of time which is the opposite to "a mimetic representation of reality" (2015, p. 299). There are several other musico-dramatic aspects to take into account, such as the relation to the score and the *Werktreue* (Goehr, 2007), musical interpretation, voice technique,

interaction with others, the timing of the staging, and – none the least – the spectrum of context and traditions.

## Embodied Action

**Action can be conveyed through narrative, moving animations, sound effects, or bodily performance. From the actor's point of view, "[t]he embodiment of a fictional character is the creation of a temporary 'situational self.' The idea of creating authenticity by complete identification with the character is mistaken. […] Consciously chosen muscular activity can generate the affective states of different emotions. […] The imagination is more easily stimulated through physical activity than by thought alone." (Kemp, 2012, p. xviii)**

**SW:**

Consequently, singers cannot remain only within the dramatic situation of the character throughout a scene. Following Doulton (2023), how could a singer possibly reconstruct the internal mental world of a character in a realistic way if the performative frames are, to put it mildly, fictive? Following Betzwieser (2015), Doulton (2023), and Lindenberger (2010), the genre never really set out to be realistic in the first place.

## Theatricality in Opera

**Theatricality can be regarded as the anti-thesis of naturalistic realism. And it has been argued that theatricality is intrinsic to opera: "An anti-theatrical opera would seem to be a contradiction in terms. Theatricality, after all, suggests an exaggerated perspective on what we take to be reality, a certain inauthenticity […]. The term *operatic* implies the exaggeration of a theatrical stance already to be exaggerated." (Lindenberger, 2010, p. 196, original italics)**

**SW:**

Even so, many of the directors who are engaged in operatic productions today primarily apply acting techniques and stage work for spoken drama and film stemming from the 20th century (Brecht, 1975; Carnicke, 2010; Chamberlain, 2010; Krasner, 2010; Stanislavskij, 1977).

## Operatic Multi-tasking

**Research on operatic multi-tasking and its effect on neuroplasticity is based on the fact that the combination of physical action and cognitive challenge in relation to both language and music is fused in a unique way in opera (Cui et al., 2021). Musical and theatrical instructions to opera singers must be adjusted to fit the capacities and limitations of the practitioner.**

**SW:**

The harsh reality that we must economize with our resources as multi-tasking performers, switching our attention between the interactions on dramatic, musical and rhetorical layers isn't necessarily a problem. It might be an opportunity for us as singers to develop our own methods and strategies for embodied acting.

In opera improvisation, we create the musico-dramatic material in the moment, using improvisational methods in creative dialogue with the WAM (Western Art Music) cultural heritage. The collaborative interactions and dialogue with the audience generate the music, instead of filling in or pasting the musical "gaps" in a written score with acting.

## Operatic Acting

**The priority of voice power and vocal versatility over regular spoken acting in opera came first in the 18th century when operatic acting was formalized through *opera seria*, before the 19th century brought a higher degree of realistic illusion designed to intensify the effect of the music through constant motion on stage (Williams, 2012, original italics). Technology has furthermore driven the development of later musico-dramatic formats in the Western tradition with the invention of amplification and processing through microphones and the integration of non-live media (cf. Salzman & Desi, 2008).**

**HJ:**

Today, there are several ways to produce music drama with room for realistic acting due to technological ease. But to claim that opera should become like other kinds of performance or refrain to the conventions of renaissance acting would not be to appreciate neither the achievement of singing in opera, nor the quality of stylistic acting within operatic genres. Operatic aesthetics aim to be larger-than-life, and that extremity is inherent to the art form and is a prerequisite: "Opera is the art form of extremity, presenting us with characters who live their lives on the edge, willing to risk everything for

love, honor, revenge, or malevolence. Yet it is not just the characters themselves who are at risk. The interpreters, the singing-actors, also must meet challenges far beyond those of the everyday world." (Oliver, 1992, p. 35)

So, how can we pinpoint the dramatic dimension in opera as something else than the subtle psychological play in contemporary theatre and cinema? And, also, as something that requires an action-based context that is different from concerts with juxtaposed musical numbers.

It is not uncommon that what is presented as innovative stagings of music drama today is sometimes quite like oratorios with unnamed and unrelated characters in pleasant lighting and basic image projections as décor surrounding the non-interacting singers. There is sometimes an idea that renewal of music drama can be reached through the downplaying of dramatic action in favor of for instance spectacular technologies and verbal information. We need to address this issue from the opera singer's point of view as a singing actor.

## Opera vs. Oratorio as a theatrical format

**If in recent decades there have been many oratorio-like operas blurring the boundaries, "opera" and "oratorio" can historically be seen as contrasting formats from a theatrical point of view. "[They] have been used as opposing terms since the early twentieth century […]. [Oratorios are defined] as religious rather than secular, bourgeois rather than aristocratic, native rather than foreign." (Lindenberger, 2010, p. 216) Postdramatic forms of music theatre can therefore be understood to be more closely connected to the older oratorio format than to operatic action. For instance, documentary theatre manifests this tendency of drawing towards the oratorio-like (Lehmann, 2006). Perhaps needless to say, in postdramatic theater verisimilitude has vanished (Betzwieser, 2015).**

**HJ:**

Distinguishing operatic music in Langer's (1953) way has helped me understand it as different from for instance program music and film music. This way of conceptualizing opera is also connected to Nietzsche's critique of Wagner (1967), who, according to him, took the dramatic and theatricalized function of music too far. However, as an operatic actor in both traditional repertoire opera and immersive and interactive opera, I have found the concept of musical theatricality very useful, and it has also deepened my appreciation of operatic compositions displaying this quality successfully.

Since the 1770s, opera theorists have claimed that the mimetic function of the music in opera has turned obsolete, and now serves to arouse the audience's emotional reactions (Betzwieser, 2015). But operatic music has at least four practical functions for performing opera singers: For Stanislavsky (Stanislavsky, 1961), operatic music has simply a rhythmic support function for the timing of action. In Wagnerian music drama, music has a symbolic function in the employment of *Leitmotifs*, but also a histrionic function (Nietzsche, 1967). If symbolic units work by imaginative association and indication of objects, histrionic parts trigger visceral and motorical responses as they appear as actually stressing, threatening, soothing, invigorating, and so on. Operatic music also serves a mnemonic purpose, cuing action and utterings.

Even though there might be different understandings of what opera could and should be, operatic theory is a possible key to developing and empowering practitioners' ability to manage embodied acting in opera.

## *Final Remarks and Way Forward*

**SW:**

Today's opera singers meet very different acting methodologies, readings and discourses in various productions, but few genuinely relate to operatic practice and theories.

And, as Doulton (2023, n.p., original italics) puts it: *"...opera is not verisimilitude-realistic.* It never has been; it never can be ..."

We have noticed cases of what we as operatic practitioners and pedagogues identify as:

1. non-singing collaborators' insufficient understanding of the complexity of opera singing and
2. opera practitioners' lack of theoretical contextualization of their practice in relation to other kinds of acting and opera aesthetics.

We believe there is a need to expand on and articulate the complexities of operatic action, taking the multi-layered and complex aspects of action and music in opera into account in all stages of the interpretative and creative processes.

**HJ:**

We also believe that there is a need to investigate how the work structure in both pedagogic and professional opera projects can secure and support a joint reading style and dramatic analysis together with the singers before the staging is done or in alternate ways.

Working with opera, we can have different goals and expectations. Different conceptual approaches are indeed possible, with opera as a spectacle, opera as a system, opera as a story, etc.. We suggest further inquiries that can paint a fuller picture of practitioners' predicaments and experimental studies of how productions and training can be re-thought. It would be interesting to delve further into our dialogue as well as enriching the discussion with other practitioners and researchers' areas of expertise.

We propose to start with the following research questions:

- What aesthetic and creative norms in stage performance shape opera and opera education today?
- What theoretical orientation and analytical frameworks for acting dominate the education and training of opera practitioners today?
- What examples of working practices are there?
- How to develop a greater awareness among practitioners of the spectrum of musico-dramatic and performative opportunities and delimitations for readings and acting styles within opera?
- How does opera training today address new demands brought by the influence of other artforms or new technology?

With that said, it would also be interesting to look at how we handle operatic acting as a "wicked problem" in the process design or organization design (cf. Buchanan, 1992). Furthermore, as performers in a constantly changing world of artistic creativity and technological advancement, we stress that operatic practice must include opportunities to revise and develop operatic techniques in a conscious and self-secure manner. But it could also form the basis for new singer-centered acting ideas to be evaluated on historical repertoire, alternative formats, and new works to be commissioned in the future.

**SW:**

The point with this reenacted dialogue is not only to articulate our own research scope, but also to spark a discussion among peers and hopefully inspire others to engage in research and development work. We hope that together we can collect and articulate various takes on problems and possibilities arising with embodied acting in opera today, based on practitioners' experiences, explorations, and experiments.

**HJ:**

Operatic training for singers as well as composers, directors, and conductors informed by performative, opera aesthetical and cognitive theories could systematically include analytic tools for embodied acting in relation to music. A collection of research-based practitioner knowledge would also serve an educational purpose.

"It is the lack of a norm that differentiates [theatrical] performance in opera houses today from previous times," writes Williams (2012). But instead of vouching for one norm that certainly would help to streamline opera productions in an industrial manner with standard opera actors, we stress the need for an extended singer-centered toolbox in opera. Such a toolbox could contain practical tactics and models, which have been tried, developed, and problematized in the application of different acting schools and traditions on operas both in opera houses and in other contexts.

How can we talk about this?

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