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REPRESENTING INTERIORITY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY OPERA
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How many of us relate to Figaro as a real person? If we do, then we are indulging in the practice of ascribing interiority to a character in eighteenth-century opera. This is a rich, possibly obvious, certainly neglected, topic for investigation, and Suzanne Aspden addressed it by organizing a wonderfully stimulating two-day symposium at the Music Faculty of the University of Oxford. Fifteen scholars (from the UK, Continental Europe and North America) gave presentations on a wide variety of composers and issues across the full eighteenth century. Eric Clarke (University of Oxford) and the philosopher Alistair Isaac (University of Edinburgh) launched the meeting with some useful conceptual framing. In a beguiling display of intellectual cross-dressing, Clarke took us on a bracing whistle-stop tour of subjectivity in the history of philosophy from Descartes to Hegel, whilst Isaac took up the mantle of psychology from the philosophy of consciousness. Between them, Clarke and Isaac pinpointed some of the central questions concerning how opera represents subjectivity, and these became touchstones for many of the other speakers. It was shrewd of Clarke to bring up Naomi Cumming's celebrated 'The Subjectivities of "Erbarne Dich"' (*Music Analysis* 16/1 (1997), 5–44), since that article stops at the end of the instrumental ritornello, before the entry of the voice. To cut slightly to the chase, I was struck by how few of the speakers picked up the challenge of confronting the musico-analytical aspects of operatic subjectivity implicit in Cumming's critique. The score tended to nod off as a sleeping partner to the libretto. Instead, the idea which perhaps loomed the largest was that operatic interiority presupposed a 'theory of mind' by which listeners attributed beliefs and desires to fictive agents via historical operatic techniques.

I won't review the talks in the order that they came because, in some ways, the most challenging presentation was given at the end of the second day by Matthew Head (King's College London). Entitled 'Psychology, Now and Then: The Conception and Reception of Mozart's *La finta giardiniera* (1775)', Head's at times outrageously entertaining talk lampooned depth models of Mozart's operatic characters as anachronistic. How, Head demanded, can we attribute complex emotional lives to the two-dimensional stereotypes of *commedia dell'arte* and Italian opera buffa? His counterexample was Mozart's early opera *La finta giardiniera*. This, Head argued, has been neglected because its absurdity of plot and characterization defies our standard model – widely shared from Abert to Taruskin – of operatic interiority. A brief reminder of this absurdity: the Marchioness Violante Onesti, a long-suffering, 'Pamela-like' heroine, is stabbed and left for dead by the buffoonish villain, Count Belfiore. Violante undergoes further harrowing, morphs into a vengeful fury, and is finally reconciled with Belfiore in a conjugal *lieto fine*. Far from being mimetic of real human psychology, the opera is an exercise in comic folly; indeed, it exemplifies what Simon Dickie termed the 'cruelty of comedy' (see *Cruelty & Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011)). Most importantly for the theme of the symposium, *La finta giardiniera* evinces none of the psychological consistency one would expect of human characters. Is Head right? An obvious response, in the discussion that followed his paper, is that this opera is an immature work. On the other hand, is it, in principle, any less absurd than *Così*? We will pick up this thread further on.

Some but not all of what Head said was supported by the paper from Kordula Knaus (Universität Bayreuth) on 'Subjectivity and Interiority in Early Opera Buffa'. Going to the source of the genre in Pergolesi's Naples, Knaus discovers buffo characters operating within a very limited range of expression. Yet Knaus flips the argument on its head: far from indicating shallowness, the characters' tendency to change their mind from one moment to the next expresses pragmatism. Pragmatism is not a synonym for Head's 'inconsistency'.



Does it not resonate, rather, with the circus of everyday life, even that of contemporary listeners? Operatic characters are realistic because we are also theatrical: we display shifting facets and faces in our social roles. The artifice of theatricality emerged in two talks that focused on the interiority of singers. Valentina Anzani (Università di Bologna) revealed how composers writing for the famous castrato Antonio Bernacchi shaped arias according to his vocal skills and personality. All the surviving arias written for him are based on similar *affetti*, regardless of the character he was portraying. This was echoed in Anne Desler's (University of Edinburgh) talk on another castrato, Farinelli. Interiority in this context means Farinelli's carefully constructed sense of self, enacted through differing operatic texts. Would it be so egregious, I wonder, to compare that with the manufactured artistic personas of contemporary pop artists, whose biographical, fictive and musical interiorities bleed into each other?

That said, the majority of the speakers played the topic with a straight bat. The overall view was that, yes, operatic characters did possess interiority; and that this interiority deepened as the century progressed. The most elegant demonstration of this thesis was given by Olivia Bloechl (University of Pittsburgh), in her paper 'Confessing à la française'. Comparing Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie* with a later, much less well-known, setting of Racine's play, Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne and François-Benoît Hoffmann's *Phèdre* of 1786, Bloechl showed that the queen's confessional scenes had grown longer and more passionate. There is a sense in the later opera of Phaedra disclosing a 'true self' – indeed, an interiority which is truly immoral – whereas in Rameau she was just unlucky. Much of her confession is achieved through the medium of free-standing orchestral passages, and Bloechl speculated that the expressive markings in the printed scores record the facial expressions and gestures of the actress the role was written for, Antoinette Saint-Huberty. Bloechl also convincingly related the change in operatic avowal scenes, from Rameau to Lemoyne/Hoffmann, to the melodramatic tendencies of the 1770s, and the confessional practices documented by Foucault (see *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977)). An emerging interiority was also explored by Ellen Lockhart (University of Toronto) in her study of operas, pantomimes and melodramas based on the Pygmalion and Prometheus myths, 'Aisthesis on the Stage'. In Condillac's famous thought experiment, a statue is brought incrementally to life, as it acquires sensory organs, attention, memory, enjoyment, and finally imagination. Rameau's *Pygmalion* makes self-consciousness perceptible when the awakening statue imitates dance movements in binary phrase patterns. The paper from Estelle Joubert (Dalhousie University), 'Josef von Göz's *Lenardo und Blandine*', addressed the physiological symptoms by which interiority was registered. Probably the most *outré* – and tantalizing – work discussed in the symposium, *Lenardo und Blandine* (1779) is the world's first graphic novel, and indeed one that was set to music. The melodrama is accompanied by 160 medically informed engravings of gestures expressing a range of emotions illustrating Blandine's ever-changing psychological and physiological responses. This was a nice reflection of how *Empfindsamkeit* gestures change at lightning speed, as well as of how the Enlightenment paradigm of the nervous integration of body and soul replaced Cartesian mechanical dualism.

It was interesting that, by and large, the speakers identified 'interiority' with emotion – passions, *affetti*, *sensibilité* and the like. Didn't characters also have a moral sense? Of course, emotion and ethics were entangled with each other, as Adriana de Feo (Universität Wien) showed in her study of Apostolo Zeno's representation of the 'inconstancy of passions' in opera seria. Whilst showing how Descartes' 'passions of the soul' informed the emotional typologies of Zeno and Metastasio's operatic librettos, Feo reminded us that emotional control – or lack thereof – carried a moral dimension. Emotional inconstancy could cut both ways: a character's instability is excoriated, whilst operas on royal clemency celebrated the monarch's lack of rigidity. Marco Beghelli's (Università di Bologna) excellent survey of 'all'unisono' arias provided razor-sharp examples of how unison or octave textures began as neutral technical devices in early baroque opera, became semiotic in Handel and acquired a sense of 'negative interiority' in Mozart. Beghelli made the extremely subtle point that Handel likes to limit unison texture to an initial or intermittent motto. This way, texture is expressively marked; if the unisons or octaves persisted, their expressivity would evaporate into routine.

To return to Head's challenge, what is the intellectual justification for operatic interiority, or a music-dramatic 'theory of mind'? Two papers hit the mark. Keith Chapin (Cardiff University; 'Pictures of the



Self: Theoretical Perspectives from Northern Germany’) presented us with some nice joined-up thinking. Enlightenment musicians were drawn to singular moments of intensity, while philosophers were preoccupied with continuity of identity – how these moments melded with each other. Discontinuity of impression and continuity of consciousness were reciprocally related; indeed, the former prompted the latter. From Locke and Hume’s fleeting sense impressions to Moses Mendelssohn and Kant’s notion of the soul or consciousness as a unifying ideal, thinkers on both side of the Channel were aware that one’s sense of self was a construct. Lockeian consciousness was the running thread through the paper on audience attention from Suzanne Aspden (University of Oxford; ‘The Attentive Audience and the Credibility of Consciousness’). Aspden ventured the striking idea that consciousness of the operatic characters competed with audience self-consciousness. Long (and potentially boring) recitatives allowed audience attention to wander. She situated Handel’s turn to oratorio within the rise of sentimentalism, with its claims to deeper emotional authenticity and closer audience attention. The hesitations, silences and gaps in a late aria such as ‘Total Eclipse’ from *Samson* gave audiences a space to intuit the unspoken language of the heart.

So does operatic interiority exist? It seems to me that the inconsistencies Head worried about go together with the synthesizing audience attention explored by Chapin and Aspden as two sides of the same coin. Given the much-discussed (Foucauldian) ‘legibility’ of operatic stereotypes, their characters are no less shallow than language itself – a domain whose ‘depth’ resides in the consciousness of the reader. Otherwise put, the interiority is in us, not in the stereotypes. To revert, inevitably once again, to Mozart, Susanna’s interiority emerges in our minds *because of*, not *in spite of*, the variety of her social interactions. The absurd inconsistencies of *La finta giardiniera* are a limit case of a general truth, but only with Chapin’s proviso that discontinuous moments are stitched together by the listener’s consciousness.

I should add that my own paper (Michael Spitzer, University of Liverpool), on ‘The Wonder of Rameau’, focusing on Act 5 of Rameau’s *Hippolyte et Aricie*, made the contrarian point that baroque interiority was often in fact externalized in natural sound images of thunder or roiling waves. I connected this dialogue between image and imagination with Descartes’ emotion of wonder, and the operatic tradition of the *merveilleux*, as in Diana’s descent in Act 5 of Rameau’s opera. Rather than giving a paper, Stefano Castelvechi (University of Cambridge) chaired a summary session as a respondent. There were some vital ideas, such as the continuity in the eighteenth century between sense and sentiment, and the parallel between the Enlightenment framing of convention and the stage’s construction of a fourth wall. However, we would also have been interested to hear Castelvechi’s own take on interiority, especially given that not all of us have had a chance to digest his recent *magnum opus*, *Sentimental Opera: Questions of Genre in the Age of Bourgeois Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). There were some loose ends, and talk of future conferences to address them: Pietism, Gluck, Mozart’s Da Ponte operas themselves (how curious that the most ‘interior’ works of all were given such a wide berth!). Did the symposium cohere? Perhaps, as befits the discontinuities of the operas themselves, only in our consciousness. How could it be otherwise? Congratulations to Suzanne Aspden: not only did she organize a terrific event, she found time to present one of the best papers, and to bake some delicious cakes.

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