

How Musical is Gesture?

Mary Ann Smart. 2004. *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

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Sometime in 1852 Louis Bonaparte sat on the grand loge of the Académie Impériale de Musique for a performance of Jacques Fromental Halévy's *Charles VI* (1843). The work, a grandiose national pageant, was a spectacle befitting an emperor forever campaigning for public opinion. In the theater, the man who wished to "appear as the patriarchal benefactor of all classes" (Marx 1996:125) was to be seen surveying the sight of *le petit peuple* as it rushed on stage to save a legitimate dauphin. He was also to lend an ear to the opera's *chanson française*, a crowd-pleaser significantly associated with republican patriotism close to the time of the 1848 revolution (Hallman 2003:246). The song, an old soldier's rallying cry against foreign invasion, was sung that night by a young bass-baritone with the right booming voice: Jean Baptiste Mérly. The singer carried the first verse on French courage and abhorrence of oppression. Then, as expected, he pulled a prop dagger above his head and continued with the stirring refrain:

Guerre aux tyrans!
Jamais en France,
Jamais l'Anglais ne régnera. (Act 1, scene 1)

[War to all tyrants
Never in France,
Never shall the English rule.]

But here something went amiss. His "Guerre" came out as "mort" and the dagger was seen pointing toward the imperial loge. Song became a call to regicide and amidst the ensuing scandal the singer was quickly dismissed, never to appear again on the imperial stage.

For Mérly, a recent graduate of the Conservatoire, this was a crushing setback. But what could he have meant that night by gesturing so blatantly against the bulky, unmistakable figure of Napoléon III? Perhaps he was a closeted revolutionary, hoping to take advantage of the cover of drama to strike an imaginary blow at an imperial ascension which committed

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republicans, Karl Marx most famously, swiftly denounced as both illegal and scandalous (1996:31–32). After all, for the romantics *grand opéra* always carried a hint of political activism. On the other hand, as J. M. Mayan argued many years later, it all could have been a misunderstanding, for Méry's rendition may have come about as the consequence of momentary cerebral hemorrhages caused by the timbre and vibrations of his own large, warm voice. This organ resonated in his ears, agitated his auditory strings, shocked his nerves, perturbed his blood, and led to bleeding in the brain (Mayan 1906:131–32).

A dagger raised on the operatic stage, then, could mean different and largely incommensurable things: a singer's execution of a scripted choreography, a citizen's opportunity to express dissent, or, in the case of the bass-baritone with a voice larger than life, a body animated into physical action by vocal resonance, a pure operatic presence forgetful of drama, history, and the social circumstances of performance.

The long forgotten event of the emperor's indignation and the singer's disgrace illustrates the complexities of opera's entanglement with the physical world, the subject of Mary Ann Smart's latest book, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera*. Bodies are, of course, central to the experience of opera, but they have only recently begun to attract serious scholarly interest. Incursions into the corporeal in opera began with Wye Jamison Allanbrook's *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart* (1983). Considered radical back when abstract investigations of musical style and form still dominated operatic criticism, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart* first offered readers a glimpse of the moving body in a series of readings of Mozart's music as choreography—that is, as musical scripting of passionate gestures. Allanbrook's study concerned musical rhetoric, a semiotic contemplation of written texts that still bowed to the master figure of the composer. It would take another ten years for the omniscient, omnipresent figure of the musical creator to recede from its dominant role in operatic scholarship and for critics to begin considering the operatic spectacle in its full-body form, inhabited by living and seemingly miraculous, if all-too-flawed individuals. Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (1993) deserves credit for opening up new avenues for writing about opera. This slender, unassuming book, in equal measure a personal account, investigation, and celebration of queer operatic sensibilities, is also a broad meditation on the physicality of opera and the powerful ways its spectacle touches the bodies of singers and listeners. Since then renewed attention to singers and the ways in which their voices, gestures, and musical intelligence leave an imprint upon operatic works and their reception has elevated awareness within the discipline of the embodied in opera one pitch higher (Smart 1996; Henson 1999). Still, as Michelle Duncan observes, theoretical

reflection on the body as element of spectacle, a topic central to studies in performativity, has found little echo in musicological inquiry (2004:285). A first foray into the topic was produced in Linda and Michael Hutcheon's *Bodily Charm: Living Opera* (2001), a virtuosic reader of the operatic body's inscription in Western literature, and a volume to which *Mimomania* is not an entirely unmatched bookend.

Mimomania tells a particular history of the body in opera, one only marginally concerned with actual scenes of performance or real singers on stage. This is the story of the body as musical signifier or of the peculiar composerly obsession with putting flesh to music. The impulse to "mime" in music is not a straightforward one, for it implies a double task: to record the semiotic richness of gesture in sound and to produce a musical equivalent to the non-signifying materiality of the staged body. *Mimomania* shows us that romantic composers, deeply steeped in the gestural language of *mélodrame*, made liberal use of that genre's coded language of expression. But it also argues that musical miming in nineteenth-century opera does not merely reflect set expectations regarding the expressive potential of gesture but demonstrates a significant engagement on the part of romantic composers with the physical charisma of the performing body, giving musical substance to a variety of attitudes toward the physicality of opera.

Mimomania, I should begin by noting, is not a history of *mélodrame*. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Pygmalion* (1770) receives no mention here, and this book is also the wrong place to look for a narrative of the genre's subsequent history. The book is, instead, the first sustained and unembarrassed contemplation of the melodramatic logic that underwrites the history of nineteenth-century opera. Why were nineteenth-century composers so intent on "music miming"? Music that is conceived as double to physical movement, to the extent that it acknowledges the body we see on stage, often seems to reflect an empathetic intent—the composer offering a helping hand to the performer. This is an argument we often find, for instance, in Mozart's operas, where sounds appears to skip steps or knock on doors along with the characters on stage. But sympathy is not the only impulse one can imagine lying behind musical mimicking. Rage and a dismay at the uncontrollable charisma of singers, productively channeled into creative work, may also explain the emerging popularity of melodramatic techniques employed by composers after the 1820s, as well as why musicians such as Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner would later become interested in establishing "less physically concrete connections between music and staging" (30). A fundamental contribution of *Mimomania* to the study of opera is the revelation that music and gesture stand in relation to one another in a multiplicity of forms which in turn can be seen to respond to a variety of aesthetic ambitions and ideological pressures.

The book's narrative unfolds chronologically, beginning with Daniel Auber and Vincenzo Bellini and concluding with Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner. At first glance, this arrangement suggests a history of the rise and fall of *mélodrame* in nineteenth-century opera. Smart, in fact, describes her book very much in these terms, writing that it contains "two stories at once: one of a historical progression that saw 'miming' go out of style to be replaced by less physically concrete connections between music and staging, and another in which different aesthetics of gesture (if one end of the spectrum is 'miming,' can the other be called 'transcendence?') jostle each other within a single work" (30). To this reader, however, Smart's history also productively overflows any neat narrative outline, for our author is ultimately more interested in considering the ambiguities of constituting gesture as musical signifier than just recounting its story. In this, I believe, lies the strength of her argument, put forth lucidly and imaginatively and supported by a mountain of musical insight—full of wonderful observations that take the reader beyond the general topic of gesture and into a fresh new understanding of many well-known and some lesser-known pages of the nineteenth-century repertory.

Smart's history begins in Paris. The romantic capital of fashion and pleasure, and the birthplace of the modern body, fastidiously celebrated by Charles Baudelaire, is indeed the natural starting point for a history of gesture in opera. *Mélodrame*, a Parisian genre by birth, was also a central feature of the city's native theatrical culture, cultivated to enormous acclaim in popular venues throughout the city in the 1820s. And, as Smart points out, its influence on opera cannot be overemphasized. We need only recall that the first significant attempt to usher the decrepit *tragédie lyrique* into the romantic age brought unto the stage of the Opéra a character from the world of *mélodrame*. Auber's *La Muette de Portici* (1828) features a mute role: a voiceless girl dances and signs herself into dramatic comprehension. What is more, this emblematic mute role was the fruit of dramatic and aesthetic negotiations that could not have taken place outside the institutional environment of the *Académie Royale de Musique*. Tellingly, Smart traces the emergence of the opera's protagonist from the pen of the librettist Eugène Scribe, through the revisions of the censors, the interventions of the obscure *Jury littéraire et musicale*, the composing hand of Auber, and finally to the moving body of Lise Noblet, the ballerina who created the role. The history of Fenella's creation and early reception shows that even as *mélodrame* prospered in the *théâtres des boulevards* in Paris, its silent conventions remained contested terrain at the Opéra. Then as now, silence tempted interpretation, and in the absence of singing listeners naturally turned to pantomime for their semiotic reward. In 1828, enthusing about the communicative richness

of gesture, one critic wrote that one “could take accurate dictation from the gestures of Mlle Noblet” (43). But if the strength of Fenella is her stage presence, what good is her music? We, of course, cannot take dictation from Noblet, and the various documents concerning the opera’s performance history contain only scant information about the specifics of the dancer’s movement on stage. Generations of critics before Smart have found this fact disheartening. Fenella’s ephemeral visual attractions don’t lend themselves to traditional methods of musicological inquiry, wholly reliant as they are on textual sources.

Smart, however, sees virtue where others find fault. Noting the impossibility of adequately reconstructing the distant life-event of opera, she turns to the musical score for clues about the particulars of a melodramatic culture in which gesture was “manifest truth.” And what she finds is both astonishing and important. We all know that Auber’s music for Fenella dabbles in the semiotic, drawing on musical codes of melodrama for a variety of expressive purposes. And yet much of the sound assumed to trace the character’s physical movement is semiotically opaque, unsuitable for interpretation. Music that does not mime and that seems simply destined to fill the room with acoustic energy resists interpretation. In response, Smart strays from well-trodden hermeneutic paths to imagine the music simply as a form of presence. She reads the abstract musical stuff that accompanies Fenella—the short motivic units she calls “transitions”—as a musical register of “pure movement” (62). Sound fashioned as a double of bodily substance points to a distinctive aspect in Parisian aesthetic sensibilities, one that gets its bearings as much from the physical impression of the staged body as from a need to tell. What is remarkable about Smart’s discussion of *La Muette* is her insight that a French penchant for the material shapes not only *grand opéra*’s scenic elements—all the impressive stage sets, machines, costumes, and special effects routinely described in histories of the Opéra—but also grounds an understanding of sound as vital resonance, that is, as a substantial non-mimetic mode of presence. This, I believe, is a radical notion, and an invitation for those who study opera to turn from text to act and from the reassuring security of interpretation to the risky business of live performance.

Opera critics who speak of a material sensibility in French opera do not generally mean it as a compliment. We should applaud Smart for breaking rank here. Her account of how Auber brings *mélodrame* into the dramaturgical core of *grand opéra* is rightfully celebrative and she pursues the “insistent fleshiness of Meyerbeer’s music” (108) with equal verve in her ensuing analysis of Giacomo Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots* (1836). *Les Huguenots*, a retelling of the massacre of St. Barthélemy, features plenty of

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bodies, and Smart's chapter on the opera dwells perceptively on the musical means harnessed by the composer on behalf of a new culture of spectacle and presence. The book concerns Marcel and Valentine, figures set in loving musical display, but also depicts the corporeal masses of innocent Huguenots, first seen living in act 3, then heard dying in act 5. Old Huguenot Marcel, a bass role often played by a larger older singer, is the least complicated of Meyerbeer's creations. He is a figure of melodrama, a voluminous presence doubled in the orchestra by an equally ponderous musical theme, his already heavysset body made only more substantial by the added sonorous trail. By contrast, Valentine is elegance incarnate, but she is no less striking. Discarding traditional mimicking techniques, Meyerbeer draws attention to his heroine in a fashion that is decidedly new. Valentine, Smart shows, is framed by music that captures the sense of excitement felt by those who look at her. This is an effect akin to the framing effects feminist critics find so confining, indeed disturbingly patriarchal, in classical Hollywood film. And music concerned with repressing (or directing) the impression of Valentine's presence falls a long way away from the merry musical celebration of a woman's physicality in *La Muette*. Like a common heroine of film noir, Valentine is hopelessly framed, silenced, and marked for murder by the very scopic fantasy that surrounds her.

Meyerbeer's music harnesses the scopophilic impulses of modern audiences purposefully. Here I think it would be appropriate to offer an expanded perspective on Meyerbeer's fabled commitment to visual spectacle. The "good" bodies of Valentine, Marcel, and the innocent Huguenots, along with those of queen Marguerite and her ladies for whom Heinrich Heine once declared his preference (1997:34), anchor a musical universe of normalcy firmly grounded in the physical against which another less palpable yet powerful form of presence is measured in the opera. Complementing Meyerbeer's techniques of musical embodiment as described in *Mimomania* is the composer's use of disembodied sound, music that seems to emanate from the stage but lacks a visible source. Yet, to find sonorous invisibility in *Les Huguenots* we must turn from the realm of the victims—of Marcel, Valentine, and the slaughtered Huguenots—to that of their Catholic murderers. The unsettling acoustic object emerges in the play between two of the opera's crucial scenes: the *bénédiction des poignards* in act 4 and the murder of Huguenot innocents, witnessed by Raoul, Valentine, and Marcel (but not the audience) in act 5. In act 4 the murdering mob assembles to be blessed along with its weapon of choice. The *bénédiction* is a scene of growing hysteria brought forth, in characteristic melodramatic fashion, by a superimposition of gesture, word, and music. It ends with repeated calls for murder as the mob raises its naked daggers to a propulsive musical

motif that mimes the object's cutting movement. The combination of knife and sound is awful—loud, aggressive, overwhelming—and is meant, in the manner of trauma, to linger after the fact. Later, as unseen Huguenots are reported by Marcel, Valentine, and Raoul to be dying, the sound of the thrusting knives recurs. We do not see their falling bodies, but we nevertheless retain a sense of their substantial presence through musical means. From offstage, the victims sing “Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott,” the same Lutheran chorale they had sung earlier, but this time “virtually shouted, fortissimo, in unharmonized octaves” (105). Also present is the utterance of the Catholic mob charging against the poor Huguenots, a loud unison that is an operatic rendition of shouting.

To Smart, the scene offers palpable proof of Meyerbeer's own penchant for the material, his use of music as “an accoutrement of sight” (114), and his ultimate disregard for the expressive potential of sound to evoke metaphysical depths. But how innocent and worthy are those depths? It seems to me that rather than retreating into the visible, Meyerbeer's treatment of the Huguenots massacre actually offers its own sobering lesson on the unfathomable as a romantic category. Above the fray of voices, the propulsive rhythmic motif (the noise of the killing daggers encountered in act 4) emerges most distinctly, and in the absence of image it sounds even more terrifying. This is to say that Meyerbeer, too, takes stock of music's power to deliver the unseen. Yet he remains mindful of acoustic disembodiment. His *sensibilité matérielle* is modern, falling surprisingly in line with a well-known cinematic distrust of sound unanchored in a physical source. In film, too, sound unseen, if not a neutral voice-over, most often indicates something amiss. This patent distrust of the invisible, grounded in a cultural materialism still insufficiently understood in opera studies, goes some way toward explaining why *grand opéra* remains to this day the peculiar (and unloved) stepsister to the established twins in our own operatic historiography, the German and Italian traditions.

The Opéra occupies an awkward place in histories of nineteenth-century opera. It was once the institution to which anyone east of the Rhine and south of the Alps looked for inspiration and innovation. For better or for worse (depending on who writes the history) Paris left a monumental mark on Wagner. Verdi, too, was eager for a Parisian triumph, and much like his predecessors Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, and Gaetano Donizetti, he drew from what he heard at the Académie Royale de Musique and was ultimately successful there. Yet if Italians and Germans alike looked to Paris for stylistic and dramaturgical innovation, they also created more than *grands opéras*. Their creative work changed opera forever, consigning what they once had admired to oblivion. This familiar argument can be found in *Mimomania*,

albeit in critical molds that are substantially different from those grounding previous formulations. One of Smart's conclusions is that both Verdi and Wagner share a similar debt to French melodramatic culture, a debt from which they finally freed themselves by way of a romantic conviction about music's ineffable powers. "Transcendence" is the word used by Smart, although sparingly and somewhat reluctantly—twice at least within inverted commas, once followed by a question mark—to describe the fundamental commonality between the operatic projects of Bellini, Verdi, and Wagner. "Transcendence" is, of course, a loaded word, one carrying daunting philosophical baggage, but which, despite the efforts of some valiant critics, has had a relatively frivolous career in music discourse.¹ It often appears as a shorthand designation for an unqualified—and mostly unquestioned—belief in music's ability to deliver the immaterial. Smart's reluctant use of the term perhaps indicates a salutary rejection of the aesthetic cliché, a rejection which I imagine served as a fundamental impulse to write *Mimomania*. Music, conceived as a signifier of physical movement, keeps close to the realities of operatic embodiment, and thus complicates established notions of the metaphysical in music. Having for so long dwelled in the spiritual reveries of those involved with opera in the nineteenth century, it is time for the discipline to consider with equal fervor the materiality of their work. In this sense, *Mimomania* offers a very good starting point.

But what about transcendence? Smart sees the impulse to the invisible as the presiding force behind a shift in operatic practice away from *mélodrame*. The story she relates in this respect is complex, and surprisingly enough, it begins yet again in Paris, this time with the late French career of Bellini. Bellini never much cared for the melodramatic poses that delighted theater audiences in his day. His interest, Smart argues, was the "emoting self," and the ability of sound to mimic the physiology of sentiment, the sighs and groans released by pained souls and hearts. *Mimomania* tells us the story of Bellini searching for a drama of purely musical presence and finding inspiration in the vanishing horizons and diaphonous bodies of French romantic ballet, namely the uncanny ability of the magical creatures of romantic ballet to transverse spatial boundaries. Beginning with *La Sylphide* (1832) the historical lineage of romantic ineffability in opera emerges pristine, running from wide leaps covered in white gauze, to irresistible sobs and sighs issuing from a *bel canto* throat, to the great orchestral breath that fills the sails of Tristan's ship approaching Cornwall. This, of course, is too tidy a tale, one rewritten into a considerably messier, but also livelier, story in the two final chapters of the book. The Verdi of *Un ballo in maschera* and *Don Carlos* makes a strong appearance here as a composer engaged in a balancing act between melodramatic convention and stylistic innovation,

keen to draw on the essential bodily vitality of live performance even as he set out to compose his own “transcendent utterances,” music that simply “negates the physical” (150). The Verdi of *Mimomania* is less a contradiction than an essentially operatic persona, one that comes to embody the very nature of opera described by Carolyn Abbate as “metaphysical flight and the fall to earth” (2003:vii). Thus, Smart points out in rich detail, the composer crafts musical signifiers of vulnerability and of muscular vitality, alternative visions of dissolving materiality and substantial presence, from related thematic material in Amelia’s cavatina and duet with Ricardo in act 2 of *Un ballo in maschera*. Paradoxically, it is also here, the moment in which we zoom into the details of the signified body in music, that Smart’s argument for a theory of gesture laid along a continuous spectrum between the opposing conditions of “embodiment” and “transcendence” falters. Verdi’s collapsing evocations of the physical and the metaphysical recast philosophy as strategy and ontology as device; pragmatism brings about the ruin of idealist schemata.

Verdi comes off better in the book than his contemporary Richard Wagner, a composer so singularly obsessed with fixing the meaning of his works in performance that he arguably would kill all liveliness in opera. Smart’s final chapter charts the spectrum of musical embodiment in Wagner’s works and words, one in which “synchronization of music and gesture” stands at the negative end of a continuum that finds its positive fulfillment in a new ennobling of “stage immobility” (169). Gestural music in Wagner is a political means, a strategy often favored by an artist obsessed with distinguishing good from bad bodies in opera. Thus, as David Levin and Marc Weiner have shown, Wagner shaped his villains—characters such as Mime or Beckmesser—as flawed bodies and compulsive mimics: agents of cultural disfiguration (Levin 1996; Weiner 1995). But it was not only in defining the abject or the merely wanting that Wagner relied on *mélodrame*. Wary of the creative force of those who performed his works, he also drew on old pantomimic conventions to “regulate their movements” (189). Thus, Wagner, the puppet master who would reduce all singers to the role of lifeless executants, became too, in Nietzsche’s view, the “most enthusiastic mimomaniac, perhaps, who ever existed” (167). This is ambiguous terrain which Smart explores in brilliant fashion. My favorite moment in the book is found here, in the discussion of Wagner’s musical inscription of Sigmund and Sieglinde’s first encounter in *Die Walküre*. The reader’s attention is drawn to “the miniature triadic arch-figure conventionally associated with Sieglinde” (180). The motif “mimics the movement of her inclining body,” tracing her movement on stage. Soon, though, the ties between motif and visible gesture dissolve, and the little thematic unit made newly autonomous

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envelops the sonorous architecture of the scene, generating “the music for the larger movement of departure and return” (184). The “arch-figure,” silhouette-like and so clearly bespoken to physical movement, returns us obliquely to the gestural obsessions of *grand opéra* and to the genre’s syn-aesthetic insistence that we see with our ears. But the contour of Sieglinde recalled, amplified, and embellished in the orchestra, also suggests a final indiscretion. It gives us the composer absorbed in gawking reverie, wrestling musical creation from unacknowledged scopic pleasures.

Wagner, Nietzsche’s “mimomaniac,” is the haunting presence at the center of *Mimomania*. To keep close to Wagner, of course, implies not only a proximity to his hypersensitivity to the body as musical signifier but also to his solipsistic manner in dealing with the subject. Thus, Smart’s chapter on the composer offers less a history than a labyrinth of considerations, bringing forth the incongruence of the composer’s theories of gesture and dramatic practices as well as his hallucinatory ways. Here the limpid figure of transcendence falls in muddy waters. Found between Wagner’s anguished retreat from movement and his compensatory overflow of gesture, “transcendence” elicits little fascination. Its aftertaste is, as Smart recognizes, bittersweet. Here there is no redemption, just purposeful elimination.

There is a litany of recommendations, big and small, to be made for *Mimomania*. Here we have the first history of nineteenth-century opera to delve into the topics of “operatic materialism” and “operatic spectacle” in a manner that is lucid, engaging, historically consequent, and rich in musical insight. I did not expect a history of romantic opera rewritten from the viewpoint of gesture to fit so snugly within traditional historical lineages. Lineages, of course, do matter, not the least for their ability to deliver competing measures of comfort, authority, and provocation. And so it is in *Mimomania*, an obligatory read to anyone interested in gesture as creative device and compositional problem, and to everyone else entranced by opera.

Notes

1. A pioneering and still powerful investigation of the topic can be found in Vladimir Jankélévitch’s *Musique et l’ineffable* (1983). Three more recent approaches are Lydia Goehr’s *The Quest for Voice: Music, Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy* (1998), Gary Tomlinson’s *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (1999), and Carolyn Abbate’s *In Search of Opera* (2003).

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