

Declamation in theatrical art and vocal art

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Abstract: *The connections between the orator and the actor have been ambivalent since antiquity. The declamation term used mainly to refer to the actor's art will appear in the early 18th century in Grimarest's *Le Traité du récitatif dans la lecture, dans l'action publique, dans la déclamation, et dans le chant* (1707) with the role of distinguishing the different arts of the word, especially the spoken voice from the sung voice, but its actual practice has existed since the beginning of the 17th century. The declamation involves the articulation of the word with music for dramatic purposes, this being the result of the integration of what we call "action" of rhetorical origin in the art of the actor. The reflection on the gestural and vocal conventions through which the meaning of a speech is embodied and on their way of functioning, marks the facilitation of the rendering of the same meanings through the sung declamation. Vocal art involves, in addition to mastering a correct vocal technique, the ability to animate the body and the voice with the help of articulation, rhythm, and gesture towards a concretization of meaning. The declamation of the spoken text in addition to exploring the dramaturgical valences of the text offers a flexibility of pronunciation that thus becomes expressive in the sung voice.*

Keywords: *actio; declamation; gestuality; vocality;*

1. Declamation in theatrical art

1.1 Rhetorical action and dramatic action

In the seventeenth century, the term "actio" was used to refer to the "actor's game" and to indicate the animation of a speech through voices and gestures. The term actio comes from rhetoric, it means the art of pronouncing a speech well and has an essential role. Given that both rhetoric and dramatic art are two arts of the word. Contemporary studies of seventeenth-century dramatic art tip the scales to the literacy of the text on the contextualization of discourse that would be a reflection on how the text is animated taking into account the rules and oratorical directions of the playwright. The dramatic art must be seen not only from the perspective of the literary aspects of the text on the theme, aesthetics and style, but also as a transcription of a word to be spoken. In theater, the word cannot be action referring exclusively to the text. Theatrical action is an art of movement animated by body and voice, and equally by emotion.

In order to understand the relationship between actio in the art of the orator and actio in the art of the actor, we must first understand the role of this term in rhetoric. In rhetoric, the discourse articulated around an idea to be transmitted through the voice and the body, is organized into five components: inventio, dispositio, elocutio, actio and memory. Actio's role is to capture the audience's attention to the speech through the voice and gesture that must give the body a thought. Thus, the study of vocal and gestural conventions related to oratorical art allows a better understanding of the functioning and aesthetics of what we call theatrical action in the seventeenth century which is the origin of musical declamation. We can say that there is a theory and an aesthetic of action that will influence the art of the actor. The actor as well as the orator must learn to attach to the word their vocal and gestural meaning through the

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mechanism of well-managed codes. The relative perceptions of what we call *actio* fall into two categories: on the one hand, it is about gestural conventions, on the other hand, about vocal conventions.

1.2 Gesture principles

According to John Bulwer, *chironomy* is the art of gestures having as its etymological origin the Greek word *kheironomia* which means pantomime. In ancient times, *chironomy* served comedy and choreography.² In the seventeenth century it was reduced to the meaning of "the beauty of hand gestures." The continuity of what we call rhetorical action and dramatic action developed a theory of gestural representation starting from the sources of oratorical action in the seventeenth century. The principles related to gestures concern the parts of the body most capable of giving meaning: general posture / appearance, head, face, limbs. According to gestural conventions, the approach to body parts from this perspective is valid only in terms of theatrical play. The outfit gives the concept of action all the grace. According to Sabine Chaouche, this seems to be the natural emanation of the greatness of the soul, inspiring dignity and nobility.³ Hand gestures were preferred to other gestures and were considered more convincing and less pedantic. Bulwer demonstrates that encouragement is physically translated by raising your hands and arms above your shoulders, aversion is marked by turning your palms toward the object of rejection, sadness and pain are suggested with your hands clasped and your arms crossed. These gestures are close and inspired by "natural" gestures. The two forms of movement are separated from the notion of art associated with rhetorical gestures. The latter are rationalized, measured and aestheticized according to the principle of moderation that governs the speaker's gestures and are included in a thoughtful and prepared movement whose role is to express eloquence.⁴

1.3 Vocal principles

Regarding the voice in the art of oratory, Quintilien states that the flow of the spoken phrase is enriched when it is aided by a light, wide, rich, supple, resilient, clear, pure voice that cuts the air and stays in the ears. Such a voice adapts to the audience due to its special qualities and is capable of all the desired modulations and voltages. We find the same qualities in theatrical art. The voice has a physical and anatomical appearance that gives it a mysterious side, has the ability to produce sounds and is at the same time an extremely effective persuasion tool. The articulate voice, independent of its own meaning, is born of the intentionality and will of the being. Certainly the pronunciation remains under the patronage of rhetoric.

The word, through the meanings it releases, through the sounds it produces, becomes the creator of images. He has the divine virtue of enchanting the being to a level that rises above the perceptible. The word has an emotional charge and a moral effect that acts stronger than all other meanings. The pronunciation of consonants is the articulation. According to Emile Sigogne, they are divided into labial, dental-labial, dental, lingual and a guttural. The labial ones are: M, B, P, J, G and the double consonant CH. To pronounce the first three, it is enough to close the lips and press them moderately for M, less for B and vigorously for P. For J, G and CH it is enough for the lips to lengthen and the teeth to be clenched. The dental-labial

² John Bulwer .1644. *Chironomia, Art of Rhetoricke*, London: The Harper, pp247-248

³ Sabine Chaouche .2013. *L'art du comédien, Déclamation et jeu scénique en France à l'âge classique*, Paris:Honoré Champion Publisher, p.35.

⁴ John Bulwer, op.cit.. p.249.

consonants are F and V. For the pronunciation of V, the upper teeth touch the half of the lower lip slightly. For F, the lower half of the lip will stick to the upper teeth. The dental consonants are S, Z, C, T and X. To pronounce them it is necessary to grit the teeth, to gather the lips flanking them along the gums and to push the air strongly. The lingual consonants are N, L, D, T, R which are pronounced with the tip of the tongue located very close to the upper teeth. There must be a progression in striking the tongue from N to T. For R, the movement of the tongue must be light and repeated and produce what we call vibration. K, Q, G, X and C are pronounced by a movement that starts from the root of the tongue. In most cases, in speech as well as in reading, a strong voice is not needed, but an articulated voice. The voice is for the word what is the color for the painting and the articulation represents the drawing.⁵ On the one hand, the color is visual, addressing the eyes, on the other hand, the drawing addresses the spirit. We must activate the lip muscles by pressing vigorously on each syllable without fearing that the speech will be too slow. When we articulate well, we don't seem to speak slowly. This slowness that has its origin in the joint is of the greatest effect and can be acquired and mastered through persevering study.

The articulation shapes the voice without abducting anything of its strength and quality, it saves the audience's attention by distributing the sounds insofar as it corresponds to its auditory nerves. It also saves the speaker's strength by allowing him to breathe regularly and sustainably. Each word benefits from a lip movement, a special configuration movement and any well-executed articulation must allow the words to be read on the lips of the speaker without using the voice. For this reason, people with hearing impairments pay close attention to the movement of the other person's lips. The voice, instead, moves, acts on the nerves. In other words, the correct articulation does not need a strong voice and a strong articulation can supplement the voice.

2. Declamation in music

2.1 Vocal principles

The theory of oratorical action finds a fruitful extension in the arts of gesture and voice specific to theater and opera. The concept of declamation comes from the art of the French actors of the 17th century, constituting a theatrical intonation of the sounds in order to highlight some dramatic situations through the word and the cell of some affections through the inflections of the voice. Its Italian equivalent is *recitar cantando*. From a musical point of view, the declamation is characterized by a great suppleness that goes from a neutral recitation to the emphasis necessary for dramatic or lyrical passages. It has found its applicability in the types of recitative (secco or accompanied). In the seventeenth century, composers did not graft the text on music but started from the rhythm, dynamics and peculiarities of the text to be recited. Understanding the composition mechanisms related to this text required increased attention from the singer, the notes serving as a guide. This primacy of the word will be the foundation of the lyrical tragedy and will reign for many years. However, throughout the seventeenth century, the voice began to take precedence over the word. But this insensitive slip will be incomparable to what will happen in the romantic period.

Rémond de Saint-Mard states that if the works were simply recited, all vocal defects would disappear. Declamation is how opera music mimics the word. In other words, the performer had to learn through a stage, vocal and gestural study to express in the most correct

⁵ Émile Sigogne .1970. *L'art de Parler - Diction - Technique Et Hygiène Vocales, Art Oratoire*, Bruxelles : Paul Lacomblez Publisher p.162.

way possible the feelings of the character he plays. Declamation amplifies the emotional states by capturing the interpreter's voice, shaping and dominating it. Due to this approach, the singer managed to install a spontaneity in illusion and thus the game found its place. As for the composer, he had to be creative and have the ability to justify this way of singing. The composer must know the passions of the characters and the analogy of music with them, he must know the analogy of each instrument with the feelings, he must know how to make them sing and place them in a clear and precise way to express feelings and passions that require pantomime. We can ask ourselves about musical notation procedures. Since the performer must be given a margin of freedom, the musical notation becoming fluid no longer hinders the idea, but leads it by suggesting it and not imposing it. The actor-singer who would limit himself to the score would return only a part of the musical message. Articulation and pronunciation prove to be the protagonists in the process of oralizing a meaning. Monteclair states that the good pronunciation of the words ensures the perfection of the song :

”On prononce en chantant comme en parlant, excepte que comme le chant tient plus longtemps les Sons, que le parler ordinaire, il faut y articuler plus fortement les consonnes qui sont avant ou après les voyelles.”⁶

Singing actors often went to see and listen to their models at the *Comédie Française*. The tragedies used a much wider ambitus than today. One of the most famous was La Champmeslé, trained in the art of declamation by Racine, who taught her how to penetrate the meanings of the verses she had to recite, indicating her gestures, the pitch of her tones. Lully was one of the admirers of this actress whose principles and effectiveness of recitation was unmatched. We can see that the latter attributes to the text a preponderant place in his creations. Lully himself recited, worked and felt all the nuances, subtleties, allusions. Only then did he translate on paper these disturbances of the soul - an overlap of action and emotion transposed through sublime declamation. Having noted the importance of the role of declamation in composition, we can understand that the actor-singer must recite the text without constraints, with determination to find the deep explanation of note value, duration, function and meaning within a sentence.

The words will not be sung one after the other but will unfold rhythmically depending on the organization of the ideas that will lead to a particular action. The heights of the voice produce various effects. The word and the situation sometimes lead the artist to the limits of his vocal means. Prosody involves a form of movement that becomes pronunciation. The musical notation will follow his inflections and will lead the actor-singer to overcome the various levels of intensity of the recitation. In other words, the approach of the sung declamation is based on the spoken declamation. The interpreter who wishes to explore the resources of this art is advised to read aloud the texts of Quinault and La Motte. During this phase of simple reading, in the absence of vocal preoccupation, he will release and decipher his voice. This operation will give him great physical and spiritual flexibility without which declamation would not be possible. It is recommended to read La Fontaine's fables. Shorter than the opera, they give the performer the ability to focus on a text and to deal, through a method, with the problems inherent in declamation.

2.2 Gesture principles

The study of the baroque gesture brings to the actor-singer an emotional force related to the mission to serve the text and the music in equal measure. The balance between voice and

⁶ Michel Pignolet de Monteclair in Michel Verschaeve .1997. *Le Traité de Chant et de Mise en scène Baroque*, Paris : Zurfluh Publisher.p.20.

„One pronounces while singing as while speaking, except that as singing holds the sounds longer than ordinary speech, it is necessary to articulate more strongly the consonants which are before or after the vowels.”

body regularizes the body, tempering the excesses allowing the actor to use a vocal ambitus that will follow the progression of passions. The gesture first expresses a thought. It brings to the word a tone and an intensity that varies according to the way the action takes place and must be played as dictated by the emotional environment of the scene or the act. The number of gestures depends mainly on the rhythm imposed by the libretto and the music. Spontaneity, boldness and fantasy can only be achieved through hard work. However, the manifestation of the affections must be tempered by measured gestures. The expression of the gaze is the first eloquence of the performer.

The actor must be able to adapt the gaze to each content of the speech. The three parts of the gesture are: 1. the impulse to start the gesture; 2. the gesture itself; 3. dynamic prolongation of thought. The dynamics of the movement is what frees the gesture from any tension. According to rhetoricians, the gesture can capture the audience's attention because it has the ability to act on meaning. For the gesture to be supple, it must have the pelvis as a starting point. The movement thus derives from a deep bodily action that establishes the connection between the intention - coming from within and the materialization of the expression. The gesture is also the result of bodily asymmetry. The contrasting position of the body allows the actor-singer time to develop his own movement. Dorfeuille argues for the beneficial effects of asymmetry:

„The invocation gesture requires that the upper part of the body be tilted forward, towards the belt (...). If the sky is invoked, the head and arms are raised towards it, they open and discover the body; during the invocation the arms are motionless, one higher than the other”⁷

Conclusions

The coding of vocal and gestural conventions in rhetoric is integrated into dramatic art and later into vocal art. Rhythmic speech through the joint is what makes the transition from theatrical declamation to vocal declamation. It is the voice that provides the most intimate connection with the spoken speech. To understand how to approach many of the operas of the twentieth century, including the sprechgesang style, it is necessary to return to the origin of the declamation, its connection with rhetoric and how it is integrated into the art of the singer.

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⁷ Émile Sigogne, op.cit. p.154.