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“Cantava nel silenzio”: glimpses of nineteenth-century stage acting as reflected in examples of silent movie shorts on operatic subjects

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The realization that “silent movies” were not, in fact, viewed in a hall shrouded in silence is well established even though, in the general imagination, that aural component is assumed to have been limited to musical accompaniment, whether from a single pianist in the smaller halls, to small ensembles, or even to fair-sized orchestras in the largest cinemas of major cities. Musical accompaniments that were (in the norm) drawn from a repertory of transcribed classical snippets, or else “genre and mood” pieces especially composed to be employed however the screen action warranted. And of course, some musical commentary was specifically composed (including some historically significant examples) or arranged for a particular film. Less well known, outside the ranks of specialized film historians, is the broad range of efforts to add a much richer palette to the aural dimension, efforts which extended to include the presence of all manner of (often quite complex) live sound effects, of actors beside or behind the screen reciting occasional lines of dialogue,¹ and even of singers. A striking example in this sense was one of the earliest attempts at a cinematic subject based on an opera, Edwin Porter’s *Parsifal*, filmed in the Edison studios in 1904,² which used both live actors and singers, with arrangements adapted from Wagner’s score to be performed as the film was projected (although not in precise

* An earlier version of this paper entitled “Cantava nel silenzio: indizi sull’arte scenica ottocentesca riflessa nel cinema muto di soggetto operistico” was read on 13 October 2012 at the *Convegno internazionale di studi* “Donizetti in scena. Vedere l’opera” held in Bergamo, Italy.

1 A typical example near the twilight of the silent cinema era, “The Air Circus” of 1928, “contained sound effects, a musical background, and portions of a spoken dialogue”; cited in H. Hugh Wynne, *The motion picture stunt pilots and Hollywood’s classic aviation movies* (Missoula, Montana: Pictorial Histories Publishing Co., 1987), p. 85.

2 Rick Altman, *Silent film sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 111, 251, 252.

synchronization).³ And even earlier, in 1899, Porter had produced a 15-minute film adaptation of Flotow's *Martha* that called for a quartet of live singers.⁴

It may, however, come as a surprise to some that a potential symbiosis between lyric opera performance and film was planned, and aspired to, from the very beginnings of the history of cinema. And further, that there were a significant number of attempts to achieve an exact synchronization of song and moving image decades before a reliable "sound movie" technology (via an optical track on the film strip itself) became viable near the end of the 1920s. On the first point – that of an ideal connection between lyric opera and cinema – the symbiosis was identified from the earliest years of the so-called "Seventh Art."⁵ Indeed, the anticipated conciliation of sound and action predates the invention of film itself: Thomas Edison, in a note from October 1888, wrote these now famous thoughts about a machine he was trying to create for the projection of moving images:

I am experimenting upon an instrument which does for the Eye what the phonograph does for the Ear, which is the recording and reproduction of things in motion, and in such a form as to be both Cheap practical and convenient. This apparatus I call a Kinetoscope [or,] "Moving View."⁶

Furthermore, on several occasions Edison indicated lyric opera as the primary example of what he was attempting to achieve with the invention

3 As Paul Fryer writes, "Wagner's great music drama *Parsifal* was first performed at the Metropolitan in New York in December 1903. Porter's film version, made for the Edison studios, opened in October 1904, in an attempt to capitalize on the success of an English-language version of the opera that had been staged in Boston and New York in that same month. Porter had intended to use synchronized recordings of the Wagner music to accompany the film but, thwarted by the technical limitations of the day, settled on live music instead. The American copyright holders of the libretto sued Porter for unauthorized use of the work and the film was withdrawn. The film is over 600 feet long and features eight scenes from the opera." Paul Fryer, *The opera singer and the silent film* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2005), p. 254 n. 67.

4 Charles Musser, *Before the nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 138.

5 Ricciotto Canudo coined the term "Sixth Art" for cinema in 1911 (which he later modified to "Seventh Art" in an essay of 1923), referring to it as a perfect joining of the traditional arts of space (architecture, sculpture, painting) and time (music, dance, poetry).

6 Thomas A. Edison, caveat 110, 8 October 1888, filed 17 October 1888, Edison National Historic Site, West Orange, New Jersey (NjWOE). Edison would later expand the thought, stating "In the year 1887, the idea occurred to me that it was possible to devise an instrument [by] which [...] all motion and sound could be recorded and reproduced simultaneously [...];" undated letter quoted in William Kennedy Laurie Dickson – Antonia Dickson, "Edison's invention of the Kinetophone," in: *Century Magazine*, 48 (June 1894), pp. 206 and 214.

of a mechanism to display images in movement. From the beginning, his vision was to synchronize images and sound. In 1891, Edison wrote:

My intention is to have such a happy combination of electricity and photography that a man can sit in his own parlor and see reproduced on a screen the forms of the players in an opera produced on a distant stage, and, as he sees their movements, he will hear the sound of their voices as they talk or sing or laugh.⁷

Two years later Edison would reiterate the sentiment in the *New York Times*, but closing the sentence with “[...] see [...] the players in opera upon a distant stage [and] hear the voices of the singers.” And again in 1894, he stated that:

The kinetoscope is only a small model illustrating the present stage of progress but with each succeeding month new possibilities are brought into view. I believe that in coming years by my own work and that of Dickson, Muybridge, Marié⁸ and others who will doubtless enter the field, that grand opera can be given at the Metropolitan Opera House at New York without any material change from the original, and with artists and musicians long since dead.⁹

7 *New York Sun*, 28 May 1891.

8 *Sic* for [Étienne-Jules] Marey.

9 Dickson, “Edison’s invention.” Writing in a magazine in 1911, the American impresario and theatre manager Robert Grau (who opens his article proudly stating “It was my pleasure to be among those in the audience at Keith’s Union Square Theater, in New York, one evening in July, 1894, the eventful night when the motion picture was first revealed to American theatergoers,” by which he means the first *commercially viable* motion picture enterprise, as opposed to the several earlier attempts that had been viewed as curious novelties but had yet to excite sufficient public interest, as for instance when, Grau goes on to inform, “The advent of Lumiere’s cinematograph was announced with much advance advertising, but public interest was not aroused. The theater was only fairly filled on the opening night.”) was excited specifically by the potential of offering opera as both sound *and* picture, to a far broader audience. “For several years” Grau writes, “efforts have been made to create a perfect synchronism between the moving picture and the phonograph, in order that stage presentations of plays and operas could be reproduced. Three of the greatest factors in the field of motion photography, including Thom’s A. Edison, who invented also the phonograph, have announced recently that all of the problems for an absolute synchronism were either solved, or near solution. Mr. Edison has prophesied that the day is near when the working man will present himself in front of a moving picture theater, deposit his dime, and witness a reproduction of scenes from grand opera, such as are presented at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. [...] The possibilities of a perfect synchronism in effect of the two great Edison devices (for it must be understood that it was Edison who made possible the motion picture of to-day) are beyond all conception. Through this great advancement, the ‘Passion Play,’ as presented at Oberammergau, could be brought to our doors, and that, too, at a not very distant date. It is already on the cards to present before American audiences scenes from grand opera, as presented at the Grand Opera House, in Paris; Covent Garden, in London, and La Scala, in Milan. Thus grand opera novelties, which would probably not be heard in this country for years, will have presentations within the year of their European *premieres*.” Robert Grau, “The ‘talking’ picture and the drama” in: *Scientific American*, 105/7 (12 August 1911), pp. 155–156.

It is clear, therefore, that the idea of being able to represent lyric opera through a new technology of this kind was,¹⁰ from the very start, something of an *idée fixe* with inventors.¹¹ And although the precise synchronization of song and image would remain elusive in the early decade of cinema technology, directors and producers of the “silent” film era nonetheless often drew inspiration from the world of operatic representation, not only with regard to concepts of economy of narrative form and musically accompanied visual spectacle,¹² but also for models that opera could offer for the stagecraft of a broad projection of gesture, and the handling of broad movements of masses of choristers (or supernumeraries), problems that could be both more significant (and more common) in opera than on the spoken stage.¹³ And yet, while it has been observed that silent screen recitation technique may well have been influenced by *l'arte scenica* typical of the operatic stage,¹⁴ little attention has been paid to possible direct imitation of operatic postures and action in the context of mimed singing. Given

10 For the limited scope of the preface to our argument here we have focused for the most part on the statements and experiments of Edison, but the early experimentation in sound and image synchronization was a complex affair with numerous inventors and operators. For a good comprehensive summaries see Harry M. Geduld, *The birth of the talkies, from Edison to Jolson* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), pp 13–29; and Altman, *Silent film sound*, pp. 158 ff., “Synchronized sound.”

11 It is important to underscore here that the “aspirational goals” of the inventors in these early years were those of finding a way to bring complete grand operas to a broader audience, as opposed to the much later realizations of “opera shorts” (for instance, those of Vitaphone and Warner Bros.) created just before and sometime after the introduction of successful full-length “talking motion pictures,” which had the quite different commercial aim of targeting a “middle-brow” culture in the popularization of accessibly brief, well known operatic moments. See Jennifer Fleeher, *Sounding American: Hollywood, opera and jazz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chap. 2 “Opera cut short: from the castrato to the film fragment,” esp. pp. 56–62.

12 For a capsule summary of this influence and imitation see Paul Fryer, *The opera singer*, pp. 44–55.

13 As the critic Edward Rothstein observed, “film was also supposed to mimic opera’s effects [...] Silent cinema, like opera, relies heavily on gesture. A physical movement on screen has to be as communicative as a musical one on the opera stage, a compressed expression of something beyond the reach of language. The point is not naturalism or literalism but evocation and suggestion. Both opera and silent film require shorthand to allow quick access to feelings and expectations: the forms have mannerisms and formulas. Both can risk melodrama. Films aspired to the condition of opera.” From “A night at the opera (sans song),” in: *New York Times*, 13 March 1994.

14 See for example Eva Vittadello’s *Il canto silenzioso. Divismo e opera lirica nel cinema muto italiano*, in: *A nuova luce: cinema muto italiano I*, atti del convegno internazionale (Bologna, 12–13 novembre 1999), a cura di Michele Canosa (Bologna: CLUEB, 2000), pp. 155–165: 155 ff.

that the early years of cinema coincided with one of the high points of the popularity of opera (and especially of its most famous singers) in targeting a relatively wide range of audience levels, opera repertory would be an inevitable choice in the search of successful genres for the cinema screen (and as a consequence, the engagement of its most popular stars, like Enrico Caruso, Geraldine Farrar, Lina Cavalieri). In what follows, I wish to add a further consideration: that in certain cases, these short films from the very earliest years of film history may, in effect, reflect (perhaps even quite accurately) what may well have been, at the time, actual styles of gesture, of stage posture, and of stage movements, that a contemporary spectator may have expected to see in an opera theatre. In his important monograph *The opera singer and the silent film* Paul Fryer, referring to the very early, extremely brief experimental films of directors like the German Oskar Messter (which “featured little more than the static figure of the actor or singer” in synchrony with a gramophone, “often utilizing exaggerated facial expressions and miming to the vocal track”) posits that it “would seem absurd to suggest that these brief films, and the many others like them, were intended as a documentation of performance. Rather it seems that they were intended as an example of synchronized film technique, meant to amaze and entertain, rather than to educate and inform.”¹⁵ I differ from this view, and would suggest, on the contrary, that in some of these brief films, we are witnessing something rather more complex at work.¹⁶

To examine whether the gestures and (limited) action in these brief films might represent (to some extent, at least) the actual gestures and action that one might have witnessed in the opera theatre itself – rather than just crude pantomime (or even parody)¹⁷ – we need to start with some basic

15 Fryer, *The opera singer*, p. 94.

16 We should note that Fryer’s conclusions may be influenced to some degree by hindsight, possibly projecting 21st-century assumptions about stage movement and postures onto what would have been more typical of the late 19th and early 20th century. This assumption seems reinforced in the subsequent part of the above-quoted statement (ibid., p. 94): “Such were the technical limitations of the time that Messter and his colleagues could hardly have been expected to produce anything more. However the development of the moving camera, enhanced lighting, better quality film stock and the numerous advances which the cinema incorporated during its first twenty years of existence would make it possible to record important performers with a level of sensitivity and accuracy that the earliest film makers could hardly have imagined.”

17 To be sure, there *were* cases of short films intended as parody or meant to be little more than vaudevillian entertainment, but those appear for the most part to have come later, from the late 1920s to the early ’30s, and would certainly not have been connected to recordings of famous (or even just professional) opera stars. Fleeger, *Sounding American*, pp. 63 and 171 n. 30, briefly hints at their existence. Our focus here is on the earlier short films, the goal of many of which seems clearly to have been that of straightforward representation.

observations. The first of these is whether an actor's (or singer's) attitude and approach toward the motion-picture camera, in these very early years, differed from the recitation style (or in any event, the "way of imparting gesture") of the theatre. Film historians identify as a watershed moment (or, more accurately, "transitional phase") the brief period between 1908 and 1914–1915 (the latter being the years of two milestone works, Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* and Griffith's *Birth of a nation*). The historian Richard de Cordova, referring to a 1907 article which stated "those who make a business of posing for the Kinetoscope are called 'picture performers' ... Practically all of them are professional stage people,"¹⁸ observed that "Before 1907 there was no discourse on the film actor."¹⁹ The influential film director Cecil B. DeMille (who in 1915 had directed an acclaimed cinema rendition of David Belasco's *Girl of the golden west* which, while based on the play, was nonetheless strongly influenced by the success of Puccini's operatic version and indeed, purposefully referenced themes from Puccini's score²⁰ in the movie's musical accompaniment), in recalling those early years, observed that it would take some time before actors (and, we might add, directors) understood that the camera required a different approach to acting style, and that

The best actor still has things to learn and unlearn when he comes before a camera, and I felt that was particularly true in one coming from grand opera where the tradition is to overact [...] his projection must reach and grip the people sitting in the last row of the top gallery.²¹

As the historian Fryer ultimately concludes,

An operatic approach to acting might have partially overcome the considerable technical limitations of early film. Early cameras technically limited the use of the close-up – the lack of the ability to zoom in on a subject restricted the image composition to either the physically maneuvered close-up or the mid or long shot. One outcome of this limitation would have been the need, in the work of the film performer, for expository clarity and amplification of gesture and facial expression.²²

18 "How the cinematographer works, and some of his difficulties," in: *Moving Picture World*, 8 June 1907.

19 Richard de Cordova, "The emergence of the star system in America," in *Stardom: industry of desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 17–29: 17–19.

20 Fryer, *The opera singer*, p. 83.

21 Cecil B. DeMille, *The autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1959), p. 141; this, and the previous two citations, as quoted in Fryer, *The opera singer*, p. 103.

22 Fryer, *The opera singer*, p. 46

It would thus seem realistic to deduce that the action in these early (indeed, primitive) short films, which some have assumed to represent examples of recitation specifically geared to (influenced by) the qualities and possibilities (and indeed the limitations) of the motion-picture camera, may instead actually reflect the recitation style, plastic poses, and gestures that a contemporary viewer would have expected to see in the live theatre.²³

Further, there are convincing reasons to suppose – given the popularity that lyric opera enjoyed in the period that coincided with the early years of cinema (as well as the *esteem*: opera being at the time one of the “cultural betterment” aspirations among the middle class) – that one of the principal aims of early cinematographic attempts would be to achieve a literal mirror (to the extent possible) of what happened on the opera stage.

To better understand this approach toward recitation, a particularly interesting document is an opera-acting manual by George Shea published in 1915.²⁴ This manual is a valuable resource not only because of the extreme detail with which the author describes each position, each “attitude,” each gesture, as well as the way in which these movements should connect with the music. But also because the author underscores, in his preface, that the manual intends to reflect not some new approach toward stage action, but rather a compendium of “best advice” on recitation on the opera stage as it existed, and had come down, through its long tradition, to the modern day (1915). The author of the manual had had extensive theatrical experience – the first American singer to have had an important career in France, singing as *Baritono primario* for three years at the Royal French Opera of The Hague, later as a cast member of the first performances in France of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* conducted by Charles Lamoureux, followed by an extensive career in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Liège, and elsewhere. His performing activity was followed by a long career as a teacher. In the introduction to his manual, Shea emphasizes that

The manner of the employment of gestures and attitudes is different in Opera from what it is in Comedy or the Drama. In these latter, the demeanor and actions of the personages approach those of real life. On the other hand, Tragedy in verse requires a dramatic use

23 Grau, “The ‘talking’ picture”, mentions that “The spectacle has already been presented of a famous stage idol, appearing in a theater of high prices of admission, while but a stone’s throw away a *perfect counterfeit presentation both as to voice and action* [italics mine] could be seen for five cents” (p. 155).

24 George E. Shea, *Acting in opera, its A-B-C: with descriptive examples, practical hints and numerous illustrations* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1915).

of the plastic art similar in kind, but inferior in degree, to that needed in Opera; for in Opera the flow of the words is so retarded or hampered by the music, that gestures and attitudes must be inflated and given a duration which would amount to exaggeration even in tragedy.²⁵

Over several chapters, Shea classifies and describes a number of “stage maneuvers” and fundamental skills to be mastered – how to walk; how to pivot; gestures; poses; placement of the feet; use of the eyes; use of the arms; how to rise; how to fall; as well as the principles governing effective transition from one plastic pose (“attitude”) to the next (and the speed at which these transitions should be executed). Further, he expounds on different gesture-types for different classes of opera – in grand opera or serious *opéra comique*, versus “real” *opéra comique* or modern “plot” operas, versus operetta or musical comedy. For the purpose of our discussion here, one of the more revealing passages comes from an observation in the second chapter – subtitled, tellingly, “sobriety and economy of gesture” – wherein Shea advises, regarding individual gestures,

Be sparing of them. Take up a position and exploit it. Upon one attitude of body and feet, you may perfectly well hang three to six different gestures, accompanied by variations in the pose of the head and the direction of the eyes. And each of the sub-attitudes may be maintained for one or several measures of the music, so that comparatively few attitudes and gestures will suffice for the “decoration” of an entire air, and you will not have fatigued the audience by kaleidoscopic bewilderment nor yet have exasperated it by your woodenness.²⁶

It is striking to note how these observations, while intended specifically for acting on the operatic stage, could easily have been conceived for the recitation technique used in the early years of cinema.²⁷

By way of example we offer here a selection of “attitudes” (postures) and gestures from the manual, posed by the author himself (see Figs. 1–8). Of course, as fascinating as these illustrations are, they remain a compendium of static representations of gesture, from which we can deduce only partially how the complete, fluid motion of transition from one pose to the next, may have looked. What is more, even if we had a film document of these examples “in action” we would nonetheless have an incomplete idea of the connection between fluid motion in synchrony with the musical accompaniment and the singing.

25 Shea, *Acting in opera*, p. VII.

26 Ibid., p. 13.

27 Fryer as well (*The opera singer*, p. 46), in referring to this publication, observes that “an emphatic, gesture-based acting style [...] was as prevalent in early films as it was on the opera stage.”

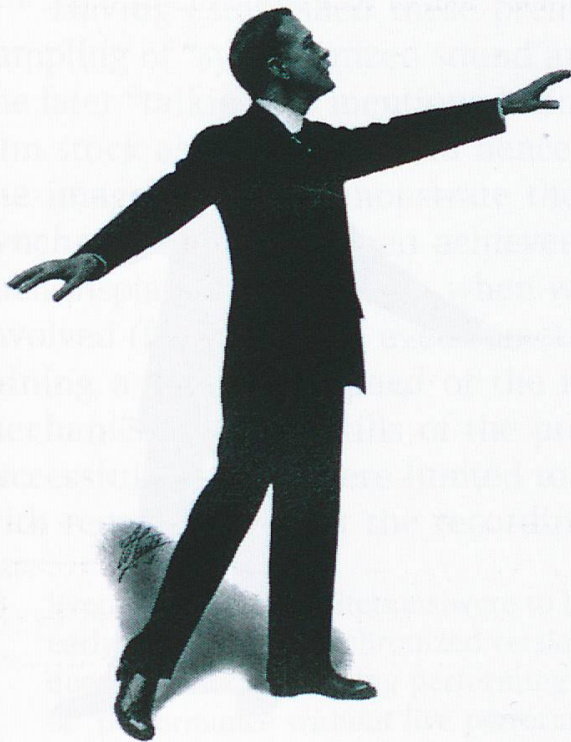


Fig. 1: Passing from one attitude to another (Shea, *Acting in opera*, 1915).



Fig. 2: Rigid-Arm Gesture. From the text, p. 23: "I will crush him!" (Shea, *Acting in opera*, 1915).



Fig. 3 and 4: Forearm gestures. From the text, pp. 33–34: "The first of these arm attitudes (palm up) expresses 'What you say is true,' or 'There is no reason to be angry,' etc. The second arm position expresses 'But nevertheless,' with the ensuing statement of the other side of the question under discussion; or 'Be calm,' etc." (Shea, *Acting in opera*, 1915).



Fig. 5: Bravura. From the text, p. 27: "[U]seful for aria terminations; when executed with somewhat restricted sweep expressing also gayety, nonchalance, indifference." (Shea, *Acting in Opera*, 1915).



Fig. 6: Antipathetic ("angry, insistent") refusal. (Shea, *Acting in opera*, 1915).



Fig. 7: Fear in flight (or "Fear of danger from overhead"). (Shea, *Acting in opera*, 1915).



Fig. 8: Listening. From the text, p. 81 "When in the course of a tableau (scene) an actor on the stage hears, or listens for, some strange noise – firing, rumors of the distant mob, the gallop of a horse – he should not usually look toward the invisible source of the noise; he looks toward the audience – attitude and facial expression expectant – turning his ear in the direction whence the rumor proceeds." (Shea, *Acting in opera*, 1915).

Having established these premises, we pass to an examination of a sampling of “synchronized sound and image” films (as distinguished from the later “talkies,” as mentioned above, with their sound track on the same film stock as the images and hence with sound automatically matched to the image), which demonstrate the extraordinary degree to which such synchronization had been achieved. The very capability of coordinating such display is astonishing, when we consider the rudimentary apparatus involved (for one thing, even something as basic as the challenge of maintaining a consistent speed of the film projection was dependent on the mechanical-manual skills of the projectionist). For this reason, the more successful attempts were limited to short individual scenes, synchronized with recordings.²⁸ But the recordings were usually those of very famous

28 Even if technical limitations were to be discounted – if, that is, it had been possible early on to create synchronized versions of entire acts or even complete operas – the questions of determining performing rights for a previously unheard of possibility of “performance without live performers” would have posed particular difficulties. Copyright owners, however, were keen to explore the possibilities; as Stefano Baia Curioni writes in *Mercanti dell’opera: storie di Casa Ricordi* (Milano: il Saggiatore, 2011), p. 205, in 1913 Tito Ricordi, general manager of Casa Ricordi (which controlled the rights to operas by a impressive number of popular Italian opera composers, including Verdi and Puccini), “was interested in reopening the publishing firm to negotiations with the movie industry. His intuition was certainly on the right track: the package of rights that Casa Ricordi controlled would, potentially, position it as a global player and the emerging cinema technologies could not only reinforce the firm’s position, but also act as a backup revenue stream in the years, not all that far into the future, when the rights to the more famous operas had lapsed. In July [1913] he pressed [the firm’s governing board] for a contract with the Cines company of Rome; in November, with the Savoia Film company of Turin. But these initiatives came to a halt” with the coming of World War I. (“mostra di voler riaprire la Ditta ad accordi per entrare nel mondo del cinema. L’intuizione è certamente giusta: il montante dei diritti che Casa Ricordi possiede la rende un attore potenzialmente globale e le tecnologie cinematografiche non solo possono rafforzarne la posizione, ma anche rappresentare una difesa nel momento, non lontano, in cui i diritti dei grandi maestri andranno in scadenza. Nel luglio spinge per un accordo con la società Cines di Roma e in novembre con la società Savoia Film di Torino [...] Ma queste iniziative son fermate”). After the War, but with the technological prospect of true “talkies” still years away, interest in the issue resumed on the part of the Ricordi administrators. As Roger Parker relates in the introduction to the critical edition of Puccini’s *Manon Lescaut* (Milano: Ricordi, 2013; *The operas of Giacomo Puccini*, 3), p. XIX n. 55 (Italian) and p. XXIX n. 55 (English), “On 18 November 1921, a representative of Ricordi wrote to Puccini with news that ‘An important English maker of cinematographic films is interested in the reproduction of some of the operas owned by us, and among them are *Manon* and *La bohème*. The showing of the film would have as accompaniment music composed by you. [...] Given, however, that this is a special type of dramatic *performance*, before making an agreement with the English firm, we wanted to enquire if in artistic terms – and thus as a matter of principle for us – you had any objections to our entering into agreements about similar reproductions.’ (Ricordi, *Copialettere*, 1921–22/5/130). The deal fell

performers – performers who did not, however, themselves appear in the films, due (for instance) to the costs of engaging such talent, or because some opera stars (Caruso, Farrar) were interested in independently pursuing more substantial film projects than the simple, brief replication on screen of what they performed in the theatre. Nonetheless, the hope of attracting a wide audience to see these short films, with the idea that the public would be able to see a mirror of what would be performed in a theatre, reinforces the hypothesis that, at least in some cases, the actors (or indeed, substitute professional singers acting out the parts) in these films were attempting to imitate theatrical recitation practice.

The three examples discussed here – the tenor aria “La donna è mobile” from *Rigoletto*, the “Air du Toréador” from *Carmen*, and the sextet from *Lucia di Lammermoor* – range in length from 2½ to a little over 4 minutes, and date from the years 1908–1910.²⁹

Example 1: Giuseppe Verdi, *Rigoletto*, “La donna è mobile,” 1908, 2'29", produced in Berlin, Germany by Alfred Duskes of the Cinophon Fabrik, using the process of synchronization to an existing commercial recording. Singer: Enrico Caruso; actor: uncredited.

It is hard to determine whether the actor in this scene could actually have been a singer, but in any event, the synchronization of action is remarkable, and the lip-synching to the pronounced Italian words, especially, is accurate. What is most telling is that the stage business is, for the most part, entirely convincing – the pauses to drink wine, the sweep of the arms at appropriate moments, an occasional bow of the head. This actor (or singer?) clearly understood the required stagecraft, or else had observed very carefully a professional singer engaged in the performance of this same piece.

through, but it is clear from a subsequent Ricordi letter (ibid., 1921–22/12/62) that Puccini had voiced no objections.” (“Un’importante fabbrica di film cinematografiche inglese, si interessa per la riproduzione di alcune opere di nostra proprietà, e fra esse per quelle di *Manon* e di *Bohème*. Lo svolgimento della pellicola avverrebbe coll’accompagnamento della musica da Lei composta. [...] Dato però il genere speciale di tale *rappresentazione* drammatica, prima di definire gli accordi colla Società inglese, desideriamo conoscere se in linea d’arte – e quindi di massima per noi – Lei non ha nulla da opporre alla concessione da parte nostra di consensi per simili riproduzioni”). Issues such as these, still far from settled by the early 1920s, would have contributed (alongside the far more complex technical considerations) to the cinema producers’ focus on short films of individual arias, ensembles, or scenes.

29 These short films were recently digitally remastered and released as part of a two-disc DVD entitled *Discovering cinema*, “*Learning to talk*” and “*Movies in dream color*”; two spectacular documentaries on the artistic and technical birth of sound and color movies, released by Flicker Alley and Blackhawk Films, 2007, ISBN 1–893967–336. The films themselves (in the public domain) are available for viewing through streaming on various web sites.

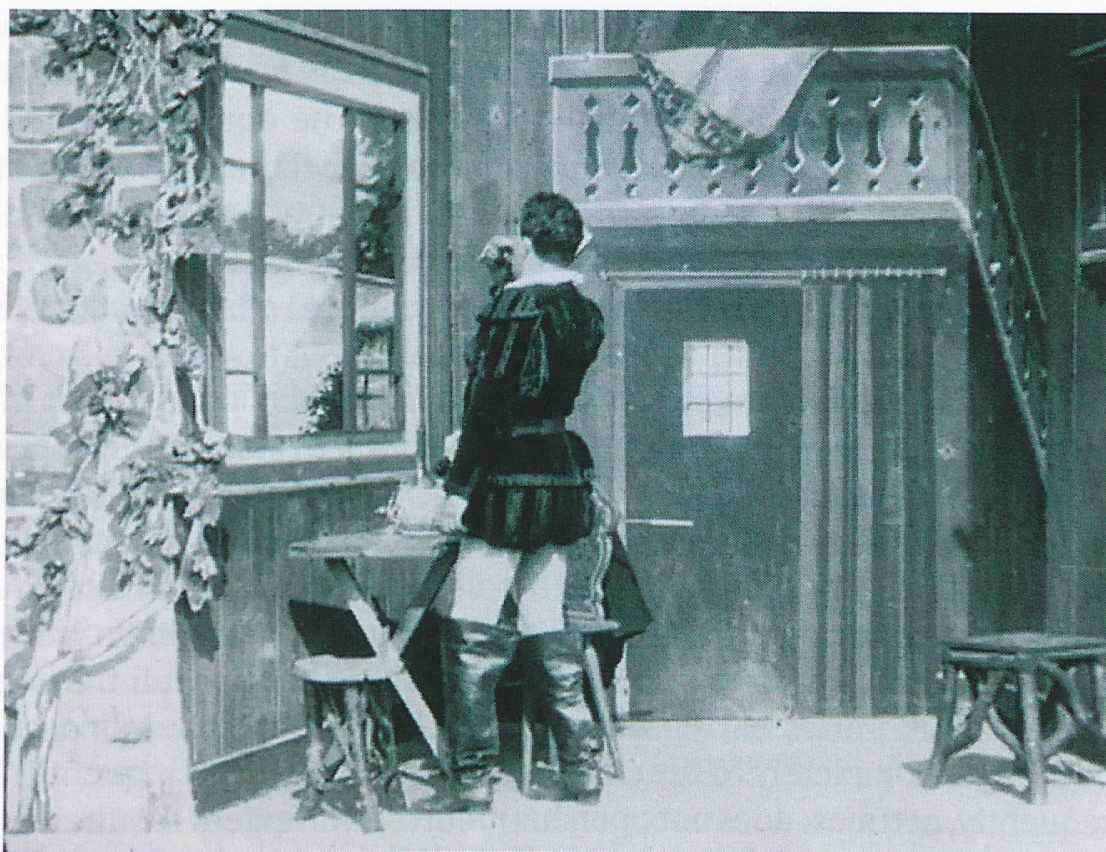


Fig. 9: Unknown actor, Verdi, *Rigoletto*, "La donna è mobile," 1908, synchronized to a commercial sound recording. Stage business.



Fig. 10: Unknown actor, Verdi, *Rigoletto*, "La donna è mobile," 1908, synchronized to a commercial sound recording. Closing gesture.

What is slightly less convincing, in terms of stage business, is a somewhat excessive bit of “pacing about” (were this performer actually intent on “projecting” his voice rather than “lip-synching,” he doubtless would assume momentarily fixed positions more often) as well as the performer’s occasionally turning his back to the audience when pouring and drinking wine (albeit, always in moments when the “tenor” isn’t singing) – in a solo scene, recitation manuals would usually recommend that the actor’s face always be, at least partially, visible to the audience.

One element that mars this short film (and hampers our analysis of the extent to which this might be an entirely “accurate portrayal” of operatic stage-acting) is the fact that it was filmed in bright sunlight. This was of course common practice in the early years of cinema, when the technologies of both film-stock and lighting were still relatively primitive (by later standards) and expensive, and filming outdoors helped keep costs down while ensuring that the images were captured effectively. Yet as a result the hapless performer in this film is clearly bothered by the intense sunshine, almost never opens his eyes completely to the camera, and bows his head frequently (and consequently, at times, does not open his mouth to the extent required by the music) not because such an action might be dictated by the text he is singing, but simply to avoid the glare. Nonetheless, the gestures and the pacing of much of the action are quite plausible stage business, and it is clear that a “close representation” of theatrical performance is the intent (Figs. 9–10).

Example 2: Georges Bizet, *Carmen*, “Air du Toréador,” 1910, 4'17", France, Léon Gaumont, “Phonoscène”. Considered the most highly effective sound reproduction system in use before the First World War, the “Chronophone” process employed in Gaumont’s “Phonoscènes” used compressed air to amplify the music more than was possible with the traditional acoustic horns. Uncredited singers, uncredited actors.

The performers in this film seem quite convincingly to have been actual singers, miming the recording. The movements and facial gestures appear accurate for performers emitting song. The entrance, the movements of the principal and the chorus, the manner of facing the audience, are all convincing. The placement of singers on set also seems, to some extent, an imitation of stage-direction plausibly influenced as much by concerns for “aural balance” as by those of visual design. Most significantly (for the purposes of our analysis here), the key juxtapositions of the principal singer’s frozen “attitudes” and movements are calibrated according to a theatrical approach and reflect, we can assume, the precepts illustrated in manuals like the above-mentioned Shea. Moreover, the overall stage action itself is *theatrical*, that is, with a lesser degree of the sort of busy background movement among the chorus or supernumeraries that would be typical, in

later years, of cinematic practice (in the instances of a “fixed” camera position) to maintain more visual interest in a large scene (Fig. 11).

Example 3: Gaetano Donizetti, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, sextet “Chi mi frena in tal momento?”, 1908, 4'01", France, Georges Mandel, Film Artistique Chantant. Uncredited actors, synchronized to an existing commercial recording. Singers: Enrico Caruso, Marcella Sembrich, Antonio Scotti, Marcel Journet, Barbara Severina, and Francesco Daddi.

As with the *Carmen* example, the (uncredited) actors miming the parts in this film seem – to judge by their stage movements and (for the most part) convincing lip-synching – to have been actual singers (or, at the very least, actors who had carefully observed this piece sung on stage). The “Lucia Sextet” recording of 1908 by Caruso, Sembrich, Scotti, Journet, Severina, and Daddi was already famously well known,³⁰ and indeed, a conscious effort was obviously made to cast a performer in the lead tenor role who looked strikingly like Caruso himself. No doubt, this was the very film referred to by Robert Grau in 1910:

Recently the writer [...] visited the Eden Musee [of New York], his attention having been called to a device called “The Fotophone,” which combines motion photography with sound in a manner so perfect that it is possible for one to behold a scene from Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, with such sterling artists as Caruso, Sembrich and Placon, portraying their roles almost identically as at the Metropolitan Opera House. The writer has been told that what he saw and heard was the result of four years of effort, and he can well believe it. What will happen when perfection comes to those who are striving to reproduce grand opera by means of science and artifice, is, in the writer’s opinion, one of the most vital questions which a future historian can recite.³¹

At this stage, Grau was apparently under the impression that the film showed the actual singers listed in the credits; writing a year later, he rectified the impression, while restating his enthusiasm for what he had seen.³²

30 By way of cultural-historical context, it should be noted here that collecting recordings was anything but a “working man’s” hobby at the time; when released, this single-sided record (Victor, no. 70036) was priced at \$7 USD, and was referred to (pointedly) in the press as the “seven dollar sextet”. Adjusting for inflation, the \$7 of 1908 would be more that \$180 in 2015. The possibility of hearing this famous recording in the public context of a moving image and sound display for only a few cents, doubtless added to the attraction, for a broader audience, of the spectacle.

31 Robert Grau, *The business man in the amusement world: a volume progress in the field of the theatre* (New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1910), p. 119.

32 “I have already been privileged to hear and see almost an entire act of Donizetti’s *Lucia de Lammermoor*, including the famous sextette, as sung by Caruso, Sembrich, Plangon and others. Although perfection has not yet been achieved, no great wrench of the imagination is necessary, in order to predict that another year or two at most will witness the attainment of absolute synchronism.” Grau, “The ‘talking’ picture.”



Fig. 11: Unknown actors, synchronized to an unknown sound recording, Georges Bizet, *Carmen*, “Air du Toréador,” 1910.



Fig. 12: Unknown actors, synchronized to a commercial sound recording, Gaetano Donizetti, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, sextet “Chi mi frena in tal momento?”, 1908.

The key point here is the observation that Grau, who knew his opera and artists quite well, at no time hints that the *recitation* techniques he was viewing in that brief film (or indeed others he may have seen) was unusual, or ungainly, or in any way inappropriately “acted” with respect to what he might have expected to see in a major theatre performance.³³

In the film, one or two cues are missed (possibly owing to the complexity of the number of voices to be mimed, and a reflection, perhaps, of numerous “takes” this scene may have required), and not all the right mouths move at the right time. But the stage movements appear, in this case as well, intended to convey a sense of “accurate portrayal” of stage technique. As is typical in a complex ensemble, the stage movement of individual performers is limited, hence stage “action” is concentrated on facial expression and with a considerable amount of upper torso and arm gesture, all carefully choreographed so as to seem purposeful and logical, and to interact well with the movements of the other performers. And as is the case with the *Carmen* excerpt (perhaps even more so, since we are dealing here with a six-voice ensemble piece) the placement of singers on set seems to reflect an imitation of opera-theater concerns for “aural balance” as much as visual design (Fig. 12).

To summarize: it is reasonable to hypothesize that, as (and *if*) more such early synchronized short films of opera scenes come to light (it has been estimated that, in Germany alone, some 1,500 such films were issued before the advent of the first full-length “talkie” with sound on the film stock itself, i.e., *The jazz singer* of 1927), several may reveal themselves to be (as we posit these examples are) close attempts to respect, on film, stage-action technique and approach of the time. A technique and approach which, in turn, would reflect a much longer tradition of *arte scenica*. Such documents would greatly enrich the information we can derive from the printed manuals and other descriptions from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

So, ultimately, what conclusion is to be drawn from all this? Attempts to replicate or restore late 19th or earlier 20th century *arte scenica* praxis (while they might have some limited interest for purely academic historical reconstructions) are beside the point and have little relevance to modern day acting styles or stage-blocking. Every new opera production should live in its own moment. Rather, documentation of this kind

33 In fact, he closes his 1911 article by stating “It remains yet to be seen how nearly science and artifice have served to *duplicate the original interpretation* in music and drama. Mr. Edison has promised that the counterfeit will be almost perfect.” (Italics mine.)

may offer useful insight on such elusive matters as musical pacing, flow, perhaps even rubato. By way of comparison, the examinations of period metronome marks or period string bowings, the increased knowledge of the potential (and limitations) of period instruments, have provided useful data toward informing our views, as we shape modern interpretations while bearing in mind historical ideals of tempo and balance. Similarly, a study of these synchronized films (and, one hopes, many more like them, as they may resurface from archives) reflecting “period” stage movement and gesture, may lend insight into the timing and pacing of musical passages, as reflected in the timing and pacing required by certain (and to some extent, codified) gestures and movements of the time. And thus, the modern interpreter may gain an overall sense of the moment-to-moment “pacing-rhythm” the composer might have expected in his own day. This, not with the aim of *replication*, but rather that of adding another layer of understanding to our interpretations.

Further, insight may also be gained from aspects of *mise-en-scene* that may be deduced from such documents. Stage placement and “blocking” relates of course not only to the overall visual *tableau* but (perhaps more importantly, to a conductor’s mind) to an optimal *balance* of sound in the live theatre. This is an aspect that cinema, and indeed recordings, could not have taken into account, for technical reasons, for the first several decades of their early history. Some of these early short films – which were synchronized to recordings made independently of when the actors or singers were being filmed – may reflect actual theatrical blocking and (limited) movement practice of the day (a practice which may, indeed, not have undergone significant change throughout the later 19th century). And this, again, may offer clues to the “spatial sound balance” (and not only the visual, “scenic” balance) that composers and interpreters sought. Taken together, these observations can add to the growing wealth of our understanding of the many intangibles “beyond the written page” that can (and should) inform intelligent approaches to modern performance.

Abstract

It is known that “silent movies” weren’t actually silent, but were enhanced by musical accompaniments of varying degrees. Further, as film historians have revealed, the aural element of “silent” cinema was often expanded to include a range of sound effects, live reciting actors, even singers. Less well known are the numerous attempts to synchronize singing and acting, long before the advent of sound-on-film “talkies” of the late 1920s. The great success of early opera recordings by “stars” like Enrico Caruso led filmmakers

to see opera as an “ideal” subject for such synchronized experiments, and hundreds of exemplars were produced. Yet film historians have generally discounted or ignored the “stage technique” presented in these short films. This paper, on the contrary, through the examination of recently restored films, of contemporary accounts, and of an important manual of acting in opera, argues that some of these early films may offer a close approximation of actual “arte scenica” of the times, itself a reflection of a longer tradition. And thus, that the study of such resources can be a useful addition to the areas of performing-practice studies, offering insights that may inform the work of modern interpreters.

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