

1-1-2005

# Review of 'Mimomania. Music and Gesture in 19th-Century Opera' by Mary Ann Smart

Alessandra Campana  
*Tufts University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/vf>



Part of the [Musicology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Campana, Alessandra (2005) "Review of 'Mimomania. Music and Gesture in 19th-Century Opera' by Mary Ann Smart," *Verdi Forum*: No. 32, Article 4.

Available at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/vf/vol1/iss32/4>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Verdi Forum by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

---

Review of 'Mimomania. Music and Gesture in 19th-Century Opera' by  
Mary Ann Smart

## Reviews

edited by  
Linda Fairtile

Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania. Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004; 247 pp.

It is plain that I am essentially anti-theatrical: confronted with the theater, this mass art par excellence, I feel that profound scorn at the bottom of my soul which every artist today feels. . . . But Wagner was the other way around; besides the Wagner who made the loneliest music in existence, he was essentially also a man of the theater and an actor, the most enthusiastic mimomaniac, perhaps, who ever existed, *even as a musician*. And, incidentally, if it was Wagner's theory that "the drama is the end, the music is always a mere means," his *practice* was always, from beginning to end, "the pose is the end; the drama, also the music, is always merely its means." Music as a means to clarify, strengthen, and lend inward dimension to the dramatic gesture and the actor's appeal to the senses—and the Wagnerian drama, a mere occasion for many interesting poses!<sup>1</sup>

Thus, at the end of 1888, the famously disillusioned Nietzsche described what he had come to find almost repulsive in Wagner's operas. Just a few months earlier he had published another, fiercely satirical *j'accuse*, where Wagner was portrayed as "an incomparable *histrion*, the greatest mime, the most amazing genius of the theater ever among Germans, our *scenic artist par excellence*."<sup>2</sup> Here Nietzsche restated almost obsessively, among many things, his aversion to "theatrocracy," what in the music dramas appears as most gesture bound, and thus, in his view, effect driven, manipulative, appeasing to the masses.

In her brilliantly concise study, Mary Ann Smart starts from here, precisely from what is "theatocratic" in Wagner, and more broadly in nineteenth-century opera. The book leads us through an exploration of "gestural music" in a number of works, most prominently in Auber's *La muette de Portici* (Ch. 2); Bellini's *Il pirata* and *I Puritani* (Ch.3); Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (Ch.4) and *Robert le diable*; Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*, *Don Carlos*, and *Aida* (Ch.5); and, finally, Wagner's *Die Walküre* and *Parsifal* (Ch.6).

The book, however, does not fall into the convoluted folds of Nietzsche's aversions, does not engage, predictably, with the familiar Germanic specters (Marx, Adorno, etc.). Instead, almost in "new historicist" fashion, it trusts Nietzsche's judgment as any other historical testimony.<sup>3</sup> As the title adequately illustrates, Nietzsche's criticism is embraced and developed into the study of nineteenth-century opera's specific engagement with the visible movements of bodies on stage.

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, sel. and trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Viking, 1954/1965), 665.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: The Modern Library, 1965/2000), 628.

3 "Even in his fiercest moments, however, Nietzsche had an instinct for what mattered most in Wagner, a reluctant but enduring sympathy for the style. . . . Nietzsche's criticisms can perhaps be separated from their pejorative context to yield insights into Wagner's relationship to staged gesture, and into the musical techniques that proceed from his gestural obsession." (Smart, p.168)

*Mimomania*, therefore, transforms an expression of resentment into a dazzling journey across more than a dozen scores, in search of those moments when music solidifies into sign—a sign (representation and/or expression) where music visualizes, conjures up, and eventually sublimates the movements of the body.

The wealth of examples is framed against the arc of a “dominant narrative,” wherein music in opera is seen as progressively moving toward abstractness and disembodiment. Roughly put, while in opera of the 1820s we might expect to hear music that seems to move “with” the actors’ bodies, after the 1850s operatic music becomes more and more disconnected from visualized action and might at most be heard as moving “at” the bodies on stage. As Smart explains, such a turn is an aesthetic one:

As the habit of synchronizing stage movement with music slowly went out of style after midcentury, the spectacle created by the visible body and the music that surrounded it altered fundamentally. Under this new aesthetic order, music might encircle the exhibited body, supplying a sensuous haze of sound to suggest erotic power; but its rhythms rarely traced or echoed the actual movements of a performer or duplicated the meaning of his or her words. (pp.4-5)

This narrative is again indebted to Wagner, whose alleged progressive disavowal of visualized (“outer”) action is taken here as paradigmatic of a more general trend investing nineteenth-century opera as a whole.<sup>4</sup> And the specter of Wagner might be seen as hovering over the book’s own narrative, marking its point of departure and arrival, but also appearing here and there as a constant point of reference and orientation. The author, unsurprisingly, is well aware of such a weighty presence, and, as she clarifies in the final chapter, her dealings with Wagner’s oeuvre, writings, and reception are a “dance of homage and resistance” (p.164). Perhaps the most ambitious act of resistance is exactly to disregard the Master’s metaphysical afflatus and to search for bodily traces not only in the music of *Tannhäuser*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, and *Die Walküre*, but most notably of *Parsifal*.

In this last chapter Smart exercises her admirable analytical verve by studying how stage directions and music prescribe and control gestures, particularly Kundry’s, thus uncovering which kind of body emerges out of the two texts. If both verbal and musical texts are often taken as unambiguously transparent guidelines, in a way that no performer or director would probably ever contemplate, the strength of the book’s own performance of criticism emerges especially in the vividness of such passages. The virtual bodies generated by a leitmotif and by the corresponding stage directions are, as it were, rubbed against each other. The result is a reassessment (and not a confutation) of the Wagnerian “dominant narrative.” Coming full circle, the book closes with a direct comparison between Kundry and Fenella, thus reversing the customary procedure and reading Wagner’s *Parsifal* in light of Auber’s *La muette de Portici*:

Auber and Wagner may make use of similar short motives and similar sequential techniques for representing the body, but the expressive ends for this translation of gesture into music are very different. Where Auber aims to make music visible by yoking it to sheer bodily energy, Wagner renders Kundry’s body nearly invisible, investing it with shadowy meanings as elusive

---

4 “Such an account of Wagner’s career—focusing on his gradual disenchantment with ‘outer’ drama—might be seen as a microcosm for one dominant narrative about the development of nineteenth-century opera generally, one that would track the body and its mimetic musical traces gradually disappearing from the operatic stage.” (Smart, pp.165-166)

and untranslatable as those encoded in a Beethoven symphony. Thus with *Parsifal* Wagner arrives at a modernist view of the body, approaching it as an independent expressive entity that sends messages in a mysterious language. (p.203)

But the book is hardly just about Wagner. The path from Fenella to Kundry is covered by an extraordinarily large number of examples of musical pantomimes, often involving female bodies, often grouped around the main operas discussed, but also presented as temporary digressions. In the choice of examples one can always perceive an authorial *jouissance* that becomes contagious. If at times it might be difficult to follow the theoretical motivations for the parcelling out of a handful of measures, the reader is nonetheless unremittingly transported through a series of anagnorises, compelled to recognize why and how those moments have the power to move. Most important, the author skillfully avoids, on the one side, the structuralist lure of setting up a musical grammar, or better a thesaurus of musical turns of phrase adopted for mimetic purposes, and, on the other, the philosophical appeal of exploring the depths of the difficult encounter of music with gesture. On the contrary, she is at her best in the apparently effortless presentation and discussion of the numerous exempla, where her luscious prose weaves an obvious pleasure derived from listening to the musical passages with a wideranging historical and theoretical account.

One of the book's most significant contributions to opera studies is, in fact, the prose's capacity to evoke that "bodily presence" that is negotiated by the music it describes. In Chapter 3, for instance, Imogene's cavatina in Bellini's *Il pirata* is not just brought up as an occasion for clichéd sobs and sighs. In Smart's account the music, by ostensibly omitting the conventional signs of nature's empathetic resonance, places in a vacuum the heroine's dream of death and sorrow, echoed only at the end by the chorus:

The effect is of a barren landscape suddenly populated with weeping, pulsating bodies, replicating in sound the shift from past solitude to Imogene's present haunting by the sigh. Far more than just a familiar melodic formula in this context, the throbbing semitone sigh figures vividly illustrate the infusion of physical presence into the bleak landscape. (p.77)

Similarly, in Chapter 4, in a passage devoted to Meyerbeer's Valentine in Act I of *Les Huguenots*, just a few pages (pp.118-23) manage both to subtract the heroine's mute exhibition from the narrow interpretative horizon of traditional feminist film theory and to render, with admirable precision, the impact of a body that is repeatedly evoked on stage by a desire filtered by musical means. While the male characters' desire to see Valentine fleshes out the mostly silent and often invisible heroine, in reading these pages we are also invited to participate in a desire to make sense of the theatrical dynamics, of the complex web of aural and visual communication that constitutes the very matter of opera.

Chapter 5 represents a tour de force in "re-visioning" Verdi: the author displays an unprecedented command of Verdian scholarship of the past fifty years while she eloquently reads afresh a number of well-known moments, encouraging us to see and hear them differently. The visual motive of the heroine falling to her knees in prayer, inherited from *mélodrame*, is used as a way to re-examine several Verdian scores, starting from *Un ballo in maschera* and its links with an analogous moment in *Robert le diable*, and then moving to *Don Carlos* and *Aida*. These kneeling episodes share a precise sense of dramatic timing, whereby the emphatic gesture is customarily matched by Verdi with a melodic climax and corresponds to a closing shift from a kinetic to a static

section. Thus, kneeling loses its patina of formulaic excess and acquires a “musical” connotation, while the melodic articulation of the prayer becomes a gesture in its own right:

Both Aida’s aria “Ritorna vincitor!” and her duet with Amneris in Act II close with a few measures of prayer (“Numi, pietà”) that sound strikingly similar to Élisabeth’s peroration [at the end of the Act II duet in *Don Carlos*] ... Both prayers replace the mostly conjunct and somehow optimistic arc of Amelia’s refrain [in *Un ballo in maschera*] with an almost opposite contour, a shattered descent through a broken chord. . . . In all of these scenes the cumulative effect is of a gesture set in relief against the breathless progress of actions and emotions. . . . (p.147)

As the chapter returns to *Un ballo in maschera*, and specifically to the love duet in Act II, the cogency of this line of interpretation becomes unmistakable: Verdi’s music is capable on the one hand of rendering Riccardo’s physical impulses, the transparency of his passion, and on the other Amelia’s reticence. Her body is freed of the need to express her forbidden passion, which is instead “sublimated” in the music: “From starting points in diametrically opposed realms, bodiless and insistently embodied, Amelia and Riccardo are drawn into a shared space, as if Riccardo has ‘translated’ his eager heartbeats into a language that Amelia can understand and respond to” (p.157). Amelia represents the point in opera at which music incorporates and contains the heroine’s physical register, and, in view of the “dominant narrative,” the point of contact with Wagnerian concerns (p.161).

Beyond the evident novelty of this approach to the study of opera, what strikes most about this book is the force with which it continually punctures the texture of a basic textual interpretation with a web of effective or potential intersecting paths. At the end of the book one hears opera with new eyes, as it were, and is eager to explore and pursue a wide array of visual and aural resonances.

Alessandra Campana