

THE OPERATIC ACTION SIGN SYSTEM

Questions about the structure of Western operatic form have been discussed by producers and critics ever since the sixteenth century, when a group of Florentine nobles created the first operas. Those people, known as the camerata, believed they could revive classical Greek theater by combining music and drama. What they established turned out to be quite different -- a form acclaimed for its music rather than its poetry. Ever since, much of the attention paid to operatic form has centered on musical questions, with a secondary focus mainly on relationships between music and text. It should not be surprising that there is little rigorous analysis of more than those two of the many systems of communication that make up the operatic art, because its complexity seems so intimidating. It may have been such intimidation that led Dr. Johnson to dismiss opera as "an exotic and irrational entertainment" (Dent, 1953). Such a label seems to speak for the collective attitude of many opera-goers, producers, and critics over the past 400 years. It is only since Goldovsky (1968), a particularly authoritative operative stage director, that there has been any concentrated effort to understand how bodily action, as a specific entity, fits into operatic form. Coincidentally, it is only in the last decade that Williams has developed semasiology to study the rules, roles, and meanings of human body languages (See Williams, 1982). In the interests of promoting a better understanding of just what it is that is created by bodily action on operatic stages, and borrowing from and building on semasiological ideas, I propose to examine a system, unique to operatic structure, that creates a special class of action signs.

This class is concerned with the bodily actions of singing characters, and does not include all other action sign systems employed in opera, for example, those associated with conducting music, ballet divertissements,¹ and passages with unaccompanied spoken dialogue.² Of course, certain characteristics of the latter two action sign systems are held in common with the operatic one, and they are referred to below.

The operatic action sign system is certainly not a body language in itself. Operatic characters move in countless but specific body languages that are current in the cultures and time periods in which they are supposed to live. For example, most of the characters in Copland's The Tender Land are lower middle-class mid-western American farmers, and move in that society's body language. That is a body language of the type that might be described in a social anthropologist's account of mid-western rural life, and from which the members of a non-American opera company might need to draw in the process of creating their roles for that work. Sometimes, however, because composers and

librettists envision the lives of their characters in exotic lands, the body language is an artificial one. For example, Gilbert and Sullivan's The Mikado is supposed to represent a feudal Japanese society, yet the characters and their situations are actually drawn to make satirical comments on the life of upper classes in Victorian England. The body language in which the characters move is that of English men and women who have taken on certain superficial clichés that supposedly evoke feudal Japan.³

Such satirical operas are, in a way, rather unfortunate because they are misinformed, anthropologically speaking, and work to reinforce certain cultural stereotypes about exotic societies. Be that as it may, The Mikado's body language is obviously and necessarily distinct from The Tender Land's. The Mikado is not more of an opera, structurally speaking, than The Tender Land, though it is more highly valued in our society, nor is its body language more operatic, though its artifice undoubtedly helps to make it more entertaining. What is important to note here is the fact that the body language of either work is given an operatic application by subjecting it to certain codes, contexts, and qualifications, the sum of which amounts to the operatic action sign system. This system is that which rules the application of any given body language or languages in articulating the dramatic action of an opera.

It is useful at this point to make a distinction between bodily action and dramatic action, the latter being taken in the Aristotelian sense. To Aristotle, 'action' is the movement of events that make up a plot in the lives of dramatic characters, and such movement is often concerned with abstract ideas and attitudes, as well as physical movement on the stage (On Poetics, 1952). The bodily action of any given dramatic plot, be it for a ballet, opera, or play, includes the sum of visually perceived movements on the parts of the characters who populate that plot.

There are at least three things governing operatic bodily action that also operate in the spoken theater and the classical ballet: (a) the spatial code of the proscenium theater, (b) definite settings in which the stories are supposed to take place, and (c) visible inanimate objects that are used by or referred to by the characters. With regard to the first item, most operas are presented in proscenium theaters, or rooms that resemble them. Such places may or may not be elaborately equipped, but at the least, they consist of separate and opposing spaces for characters and audiences, divided by a pit for instrumental musicians. Included are offstage areas to and from which characters make entrances and exits. There is a directional principle inherent in such an arrangement: All bodily actions must be displayed toward the audience so that they can be seen. In the spoken theater, these actions are qualified by the necessity of projecting characters' voices toward the audience. So, too, in the opera, where it is also

necessary to balance the musical sounds of characters' voices against each other and those of the musical instruments. Action sign images for all operas are composed in a way that does not violate this directional principle for aural and visible clarity. The code that is dedicated to this principle has to do with conventional rules for stage composition, and protocols for maintaining the audience's view of the characters. These rules are too many and complex to enumerate here, but are widely known with reference to the blocking of plays and dances, techniques for upstaging, countering, taking focus, and so forth. They are well documented; for example, Goldovsky (1968), Dietrich (1953), and Humphrey (1959).

The second factor -- the fact that all operas, ballets, and plays occur in definite settings -- is represented by various kinds of visual effects such as scenery, lighting, and decorative objects. Occasionally, there are neutral settings, for which nothing special is installed on the stage to represent a particular place. Yet, the stage represents a definite, if abstract, place, and the significance of any action sign system employed depends, in part, on the visual context in which it occurs.⁴

As for the third factor -- the presence of inanimate objects (stage properties) -- if the opera requires them, they are located in various places of the setting and/or carried about by the characters. Room furnishings, such as tables and chairs, are factors in the three-dimensional paths characters make throughout the spaces in which they live. Many gestural actions of characters are oriented to things such as messages written on notes, weapons, jewels, and so forth. These constitute objects in the surrounding space to which characters orient their gestures or otherwise manipulate and move around with their bodies.

Like all ballets that are performed in association with musical scores, all operas exist within the duration of a musical event. Thus matters of timing and duration in the operatic action sign system are ruled by the temporal organization of the work's music. However, this does not necessarily mean that the rhythmic accents of one are necessarily identical with those of the other. Such synchronicity is imposed only for particular dramatic reasons, as in the example illustrated later. In other cases a character may be visibly still during a particular passage. Such activity is not that of 'doing nothing', but constitutes a single action sign that lasts the entire duration of that passage. There are, of course, static productions that bore audiences because they have too much stillness. This may be due to the stage director's failure to present the opera's lyric qualities (which are not treated here), or else to careless performance by singers (which is discussed later in this article).⁵

In opera as well as the spoken theater, most characters have a vocal text. As I mentioned above, both forms require that characters' bodily actions take them to places from which their text can be clearly heard by the audience. However, the extraordinariness of singing

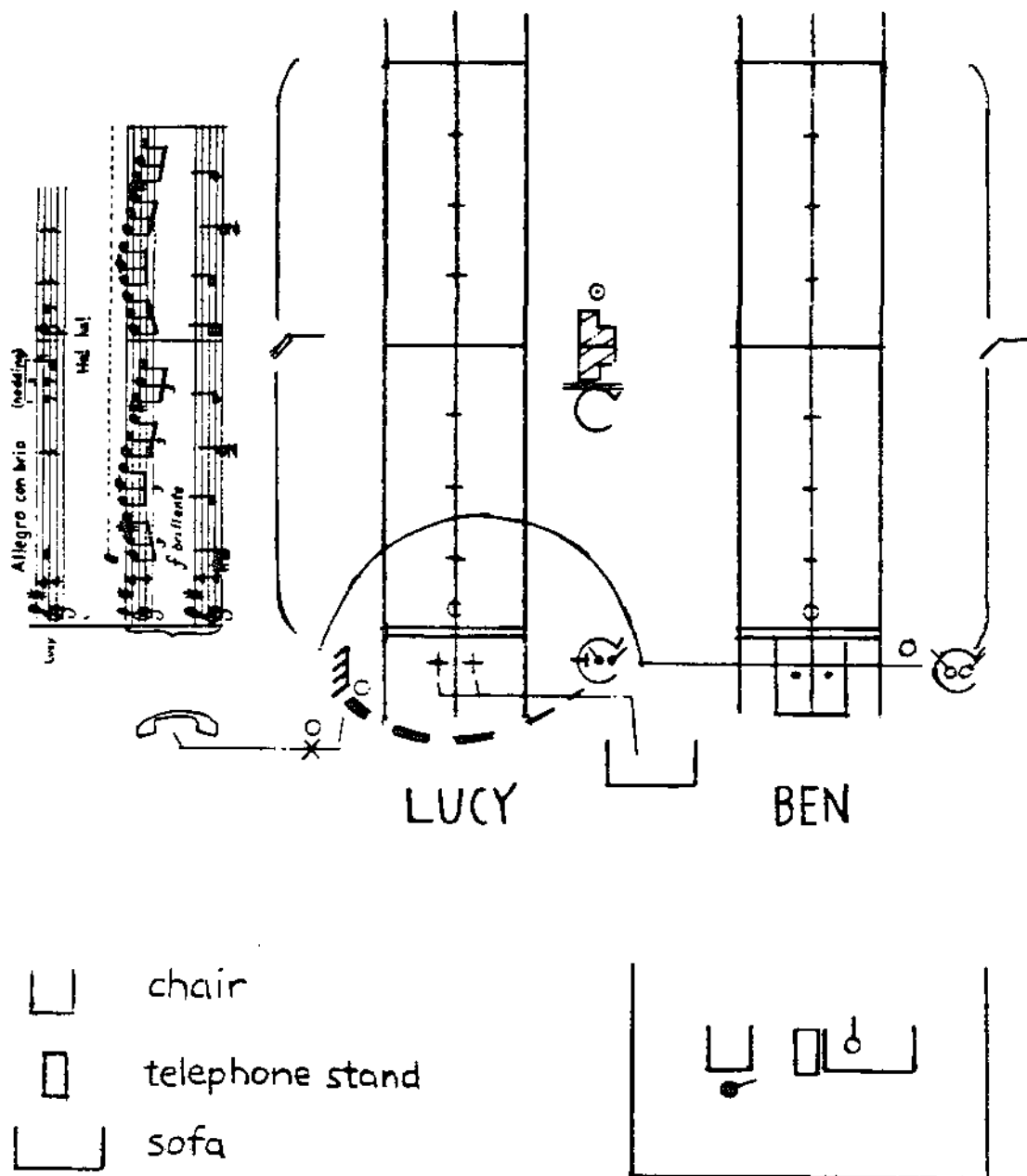
restricts the ways operatic action signs can be combined with vocal expressions. This restriction is more stringent than that which governs simultaneous speech and movement in either the spoken theater or in everyday life. Consider Lucky's single speech in Samuel Beckett's play, Waiting for Godot. As difficult and unusual as it is for any person to give a talk while pulling at ropes and wrestling with three antagonists, it is acceptable in this play, as well as conceivable in real life. However, there are certain types of singing, such as the ornamented coloratura in the Queen of the Night's aria in Mozart's The Magic Flute, that are patently impossible for even the most talented virtuoso to perform while moving rapidly about from place to place on the stage. Even if one could find a believable motivation for such behavior (admittedly unlikely), an attempt to do so would eradicate the character, because her music would be destroyed.⁶ The constraint of singing on bodily action is not always as severe as in the case of Mozart's Queen, but it is always a factor, even if subtly so.

Perhaps one could say that the essence of an operatic action sign system lies in the fact that its characters sing. While this is important, such a statement is simplistic because, not only do the characters sing, they do so in accordance with six other factors that are always present. They do so with the accompaniment of expressions in a distinct body language, within a definite dramatic context, according to the code of the proscenium theater, during a larger musical event, surrounded by settings that represent particular places, and with reference to useful and meaningful objects. There are simultaneous and sequential interactions between all seven factors, and that is what makes the action sign system particularly operatic.

These interactions can be discussed with reference to a fragment (contained in Fig. 1) from my reading of the bodily action in Gian-Carlo Menotti's The Telephone.⁷

Lucy, one of the two visible human characters in this opera buffa, is engaged in a protracted telephone conversation with her unseen friend Margaret.⁸ The call occurs while she is receiving Ben, who is in a hurry to propose marriage, and introduces one of the major plot complications -- Lucy's busy social life -- which wastes Ben's valuable time. As the score indicates (See Fig. 1) Lucy is sitting on her sofa near her telephone stand while holding the receiver to her left ear with her left hand. Her body is in an active postural attitude of 'narrowing'.⁹ Ben is upstage to her left, watching and listening intently in an attempt to learn the content of the conversation. During the measures illustrated, Lucy responds to Margaret by nodding in association with her laughter. It is with this bodily action of nodding that the following analysis is concerned.

This little nod is a familiar conventional action sign image for affirmation in the body language idiolect of The Telephone, namely that of the northeastern American, mid-twentieth century, urban middle class.



(Music: Menotti, 1947, p.11. Movement: Peterson, forthcoming.)

FIG. 1

The rest of the things that make this nod specifically operatic are as follows. First of all, it happens while Lucy is sitting on a sofa and Ben is standing behind a chair in a setting that represents the living room of her apartment. Lucy's and Ben's three-dimensional orientation conforms with proscenium theater requirements that she be easily heard by the audience and her nod be easily seen. Though this is a very small movement, its presence is reinforced by its being an object of Ben's rather intense focus. The nod occurs in a dramatic context that includes not only the plot complication mentioned above, but also a specific episode in the sub-plot of Lucy's conversation with Margaret. Lucy's handling of the receiver indicates that she is enthusiastically responding to and encouraging her friend to tell her some gossip. (Margaret's tale is indicated in the treble line of the piano accompaniment.) Lucy's nod is comical, as befits an opera buffa, for two reasons. For one, she is shown to be an overly demonstrative character who nods even though her friend on the other end of the wire cannot see her. For the other, her nod is strictly coordinated with the musical timing of her vocal utterance. Such coordination lends a momentary mechanical quality to her character, which is thus governed by Bergson's law: "The attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (1956:79).

This seemingly mechanistic association is patterned so that the musical upbeat is associated directly with the lift of her head. Likewise, the downward motion is simultaneous with the downbeat of the next measure. Although a comical nod can begin just as well with a downward motion and end with an upward one, the operatic action sign system dictates that the movement be as it is written in the Labanotated example because of good singing practices: Given that a nod is called for during an upward leap over the interval of a fourth at that particular place in the soprano tessitura, it is better that a downward nod accompany the higher note than a lift of the head.

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The example of a nod from The Telephone illustrates a conventional action sign and is useful because it enables a discussion of each of the seven factors that make up the operatic action sign system. However, not many bodily actions in The Telephone, or any other opera, provide such compact examples. Nor can the workings of the seven factors always be described with such relative brevity. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that all bodily actions in an opera are action signs, conventional or not, because they all include images that signify dramatic concepts.¹⁰ The meaning of these concepts is not fulfilled without additional signification by music and text, but if the three are perceived as a whole, the opera seems to come to life, whether it is being read at home or seen and heard in an opera house. When that happens, operatic characters can become believable, in spite of the fact that few people go around in everyday life singing to others instead of talking.

It is unfortunate that people go away from all too many productions with the notion that the activities of singers constitute operatic literature. Langer complains that "in Wagner's operas, however exciting the music, the action drags on interminably, and the actors stand around most of the time", and she goes on to complain there is little literary value in Wagner's work (1963:161). I certainly disagree, but perhaps Langer should not be criticised for her opinion, because she has likely attended productions in which the singers, not the characters, stood around most of the time. Such staging constitutes a serious fault that obliterates the significance of many operas, and diminishes the power of the art-form as a literary medium. Such a sad state of artistic affairs is unnecessary, for, as I have elsewhere demonstrated, an opera can be seen to have substantial literary value if its inherent bodily actions are taken into account (Peterson, forthcoming). This state is largely due to incompetent directors or to singers who do not know how to dedicate themselves to the semasiological bodies of their characters.¹¹

Actually, from a literary and visual perspective, the only bodies that operatic characters possess are semasiological ones, meaning that they have no reality except in the creation of action signs. The means by which these expressive bodies are perceived depends on whether one is actually attending an opera or imagining the bodily action while reading the score. The former case depends on singers presenting the bodily actions of the characters they portray, and the latter on the movement literacy of the score-reader. In either case, the essence of the operatic bodily action sign system resides in the movement of semasiological bodies. This is what elevates operatic movement to a literary status -- one that deserves wider attention and recognition. Even more important, this is what brings an opera to life and makes it interesting.

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NOTES

1. Ballet divertissements are ruled in much the same way as full-length ballets. That is the subject of much of Williams' work in establishing semasiology. See Williams, 1975, 1979.
2. These are important in French opéra-comique, German singspiel, English ballad opera and light opera. Such passages are generally ruled by the system employed in the spoken theater. That art-form has not been explored in semasiological terms, though Pavis (1982) and Elam (1980) have written interesting treatises on theater semiology and semiotics, respectively.

3. It is acknowledged that The Mikado is a light opera and contains spoken passages of the type excluded. Nevertheless, it is a genuine opera, and provides an appropriate contrasting example.
4. Associated with this scenic aspect is the fact that all bodily actions of characters are somehow qualified by their dress. For example, in the grand procession of Verdi's Aida, the Pharaoh's bodily action gives the image of a king in his domain. This is so, in part, because his movement vocabulary is restricted by his elaborate high crown and long train. The relationships between bodily actions and costumes deserve thorough investigation, but are too complex sufficiently to discuss here. For a fascinating and perceptive account of operatic costume, which takes body movement into account, see Van Witsen (1981).
5. There are also operatic passages that include no bodily action, either because they are intended for the ears (e.g., instrumental overtures) or because they are intended to be accompanied by visual effects representing non-human phenomena, e.g., the thunderstorm in Rossini's The Barber of Seville.
6. To be sure, some singers would cite this prohibition as justification for staying as immobile as possible while they sing. Such reasoning is often an excuse for poor performing technique, and does not pertain to the operatic action sign system.
7. This reading is part of a recent doctoral dissertation at New York University. By citing these seven interacting factors and their constraints on interpreting music, text, and stage directions, I have demonstrated how one can derive bodily action from a standard opera score. This method of reading is augmented by certain inventions and can be utilized in the writing of an opera's complete movement score. See Peterson (forthcoming).
8. Those who know The Telephone will recognize this call as being Lucy's first aria, an aria d'agilita that begins "Hello! Hello! Oh Margaret, it's you!"
9. 'Narrowing' indicates a general quality of movement associated with Lucy's action of conversing on her telephone. The term is taken from the technical nomenclature of Laban Movement Analysis, most specifically that having to do with changes in body shapes (See Dell, 1973:54-58).
10. Williams points out the futility of attempting to separate movements into 'symbolic' and 'instrumental' actions in anthropological studies (1979:42).

11. This confusion about the difference between singers' and characters' bodies is heightened by the common practice of many famous opera stars to insert bodily actions that are oriented to their personal aggrandisement as celebrities, especially in the 19th century (See Martorella, 1983). These incompetencies are matters of performance and further consideration of them does not belong to a discussion of what constitutes operatic action sign systems, given the Saussurian distinction maintained by Williams regarding bodily action and acting (Williams, 1979:42).

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