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The Early Baroque Singer as Actor: Portraying Emotion on the Venetian Opera Stage

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Abstract

Though Baroque opera is primarily concerned with the expression of affect, musicologists have barely explored the relationships between seventeenth-century opera and historical philosophies of emotion, and particularly their implications for interpretation and performance. Thus, music professionals incongruously apply later Baroque (or even twenty-first-century) ideas about affect in our interpretations, resulting in analyses and portrayals that do not accord with their creators' beliefs about the physiological process of emotional reactions. Affective content in music is rooted in the dominant philosophical theory of emotion in its originators' milieu. Specifically, operas that flourished in pre-1660 Italy—before Descartes's Doctrine of Emotions spread throughout Europe—represent affect differently than post-1660 works. Distinguishing between these approaches is vital for those who seek to produce thoughtful depictions or analyses of historical affect; e.g., musicologists examining works by Francesco Cavalli or directors and performers preparing productions of Claudio Monteverdi's operas.

The central role of the singer-actor in this repertoire provides a convenient entry point into its pre-Cartesian depiction of emotion. This paper examines musical and dramatic interpretations of affect in popular seventeenth-century Venetian operas, which are based in Aristotelian emotional theory. Extant historical sources relevant to the performance of popular mid-century operas, including personal letters, acting manuals, courtesy books, and firsthand accounts of performance, reveal how singer-actors used vocal expression, physical acting, and gesture to communicate emotion on the Venetian stage before the Doctrine of Affections. The resulting conclusions provide guidance for scholars and performers who seek to interpret the versatile emotional content of early Baroque repertoire.