

ACTIO

Occasional Newsletter of the
Australian Gesture Workshop
November 2004

NOTABLE ADVANCE FOR GESTURE IN BRISBANE

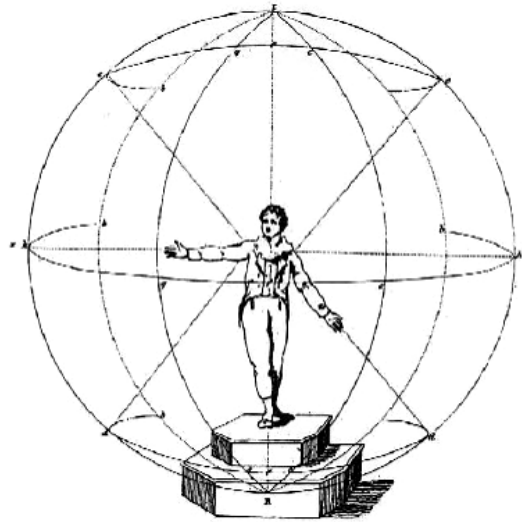
Not since 1972, when Dene Barnett gestured Rameau's "Pygmalion" for the Adelaide Festival of Arts, has there been such a determined effort to inject Gesture into an opera as the recent Queensland Conservatorium semi-staged production of "Les Arts Florissants" by Marc-Antoine Charpentier (1643-1704).

On this occasion it was researcher-singer Aja Lynne who trained the performers in the art. She first encountered Gesture when Helga Hill gave an intensive weekend in the subject in Brisbane two years ago, and this has been followed by further meetings of the two in Brisbane and Melbourne.

The Conservatorium's Early Music Vocal Ensemble and Baroque Music Ensemble, under the direction of Peter Roennfeldt, took part in the October 24 presentation of "Les Arts Florissants", which is sometimes described as a chamber opera.

Prolonged applause greeted the performance and Aja Lynne had many questions to answer about Gesture following her brief talk about the art prior to the event.

The Australian Gesture Workshop congratulates Aja Lynne and those associated with this project which has enlivened public awareness of Gesture in Brisbane to a level not otherwise found outside of Melbourne.



TWO GESTURE COURSES FOR MELBOURNE – 2005

In addition to the usual Introductory Course in Gesture, held at the Early Music Studio (University of Melbourne) in the first semester, an Advanced Course will be offered in Melbourne during the second half of the next year.

Successful completion of the Introductory Course is a prerequisite for the Advanced program which will be limited to five applicants and will take place at 52 Nimmo Street, Middle Park.

Dates have yet to be finalized. For information and application forms 'phone 9699 8417.

LIGHTER READING IN THE GESTURE LIBRARY

We thank Christine Balint for donating a copy of *Ophelia's Fan* (see over). It will partner Ann Blainey's *Fanny and Adelaide* which tells the story of the Kemble sisters - Fanny an actress and Adelaide a singer of the early 19th century. Their aunt was Mrs. Siddons, an actress who was famed for her gesture which is illustrated in drawings in Gilbert Austin's *Chironomia* 1806 (also in the Gesture library).

Website <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~earlyart/>

REVIEW:

OPHELIA'S FAN

A STORY ABOUT DREAMS, SHAKESPEARE, LOVE – AND GESTURE!

What do you do when a writer applies for one of only six places in an annual course in the Art of Gesture that you have specifically devised for actors and singers?

That conundrum confronted Helga Hill back in 2000 when a young Melbourne novelist, aiming to write about a 19th century actress, sought a place in that year's Introductory Course.

After initial hesitation the application was accepted and that turned out to be a fortuitous decision. For the writer was Christine Balint and her second novel, *Ophelia's Fan* has just been released to considerable acclaim.

The novel – based on fact – outlines the life of noted Irish actress, Harriett Smithson, who lived from 1800 to 1854. She became the wife of composer Hector Berlioz who maintained that she was the inspiration for “Symphony Fantastique”.

Although Christine Balint was not an actress, she worked with enthusiasm alongside the five other participants in the 2000 course, presenting gestured works to the class at the end of the seventh and tenth weeks.

It says much about her quest for authenticity that she would subject herself in this way to the rigours of such an intensive and demanding program.

But Christine Balint knew what she wanted. What better way to understand the mind of a 19th century actress than to gain a practical knowledge of one of the most esteemed skills of the theatre of the day?

In reviewing *Ophelia's Fan* it is hard to do justice to what has been accomplished. In summary it might be said that the novel – named after one of Harriett Smithson's most famous roles – is a remarkable display of imaginative, often poetic, writing that tells with sensitivity a story that ranges from triumph to tragedy but ends in sunshine.

Gesture is an on-going theme throughout much of the work, being delicately woven into the overall narrative. We discover that actors of the era understood the art from early years. In the novel, Harriett is coached by her actor-father for her first Dublin performance at the age of fourteen.

To gain fluency in Gesture takes time and every spare moment must be devoted to the task – at least during the initial stages. Correct, elegant finger positions can be held while out walking, and much can be achieved in front of a mirror. Harriett even wonders whether she gestures in her sleep!

Sometimes, in her mind, she paints the scene in a play as her audience will see it – just as Christine Balint was taught by Helga Hill to bring an audience “into the picture”. But, Gesture aside, it is the author's mastery of story-telling that makes *Ophelia's Fan* so memorable as she guides us through childhood scenes of Ennis, in Ireland, to Harriett Smithson's early successes in Dublin and London, and on to eventual triumphs in Paris.

It is a back and forth journey, like a tapestry where parts are added in different places until the scene is complete. And on the way we meet, in passing, many of the illustrious English actors of the era: Siddons, Kean, Macready – the names are all there.

If *Ophelia's Fan* can be seen as something of a monument to Gesture, it is even more a monument to those who used the art so splendidly, yet discreetly, to enthrall the audiences of their time.