

Reflections on Puppets and Music

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For Joachim with very best wishes

Puppets and music are like bread and butter. Vittorio Podrecca, creator of the Teatro dei Piccoli, compared the marionette to a stringed instrument such as a harp, and described the operator as a virtuoso on the instrument that is the puppet.¹ I do not intend to speak about the Salzburger Marionettentheater, Joseph Haydn's work for the Esterházy family or even Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni's operas staged at the Cancellaria Palace in Rome in the early eighteenth century. In eighteenth-century Italy a word used for operating puppets was 'ballare' – to dance. Sometimes marionette performers asked permission to 'ballare' with puppets. The term was not restricted to dancing, but the involvement of music is certainly suggested. In the early nineteenth century Joseph Schütz of Potsdam, one of the famous puppeteers of his time, referred to the final part of his programme, a selection of variety turns (performed to music) as the ballet, which was so called because it was the non-dramatic part of the programme and without dialogue.² In Britain the term 'ballet' was not much used, but a section of the programme was devoted to what were often called 'fantoccini' and consisted of trick and variety numbers (including metamorphoses or shape changing puppets), as well as dancers, sometimes in ethnic costumes, or in groups of four who might dance a quadrille. The music had to be appropriate to the individual acts of jugglers, tumblers, stilt-walkers, chair balancers, or the produce puppets such as the Grand Turk, who might breakup into six or more figures, or La Mere Gigogne (Judy Callaghan in England), who produced numerous offspring from her skirts.

In the second half of the century most companies added a Minstrel show, often referred to as 'Ethiopian Serenaders', and this allowed for a further musical element, including a number of songs. By the end of the century marionette versions of music-hall acts became popular and the invention of the

¹ John McCormick with Alfonso Cipolla and Alessandro Napoli, *The Italian Puppet Theatre: A History*, Jefferson, NC, 2010, p. 159; see also Antonietta Sammartano, 'Teatro dei Piccoli', in: *World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts*, <https://wepa.unima.org/en/teatro-dei-piccoli/> (accessed 22 March 2021).

² Hans R. Purschke, *Die Entwicklung des Puppenspiels in den klassischen Ursprungsländern Europas. Ein historischer Überblick*, Frankfurt am Main 1984, p. 103.

gramophone allowed audiences to enjoy the voices of the original interpreters which could accompany their marionette lookalikes.

In virtually every culture where there are puppets there are also musicians. The Indonesian Wayang Kulit shadow show involves an entire gamelan orchestra, whilst the solo performer or 'dalang' has to narrate, provide dialogue and sing. He also has to use a form of old court Javanese which the modern audience does not really understand, as well as a more contemporary idiom. The Rajasthan Kathputli has a group of musicians at the side of the stage and they, with changes of rhythm, dictate how the puppets should move. In the early 1990s in Pakistan a Punjabi puppeteer gave a performance and we, a group of Europeans, listened with fascination to the music and its vocal accompaniment, assuming we were listening to a piece of epic narration. The puppeteer brought us down to earth when he said we had been listening to pop songs, and when someone asked him why he did not use more traditional music the response was that if he did, he would have no audience and could not earn his living. The audience came for the songs as much as the puppets.

On another occasion, this time in India, I attended a traditional performance of material from the *Ramayana*. Music was, of course, used for the countless battles between Rama and his associates, and Ravana and his. Despite the use of Indian instruments and orchestration, the music for these scenes sounded rather familiar, and suddenly, to the amazement of those around us, we broke down into helpless mirth, recognizing that we were actually listening to a very popular Irish dance tune of the early nineteenth century, *The Rakes of Mallon*, completely transposed, and presumably imported with a British regiment during the years of the Raj. The Japanese Bunraku which evolved in the sixteenth century brought together puppets (each main figure operated by three manipulators) and the Jōruri tradition of narration and music. The different components are separated and it is up to the audience to assemble them into a single experience. The main stage is occupied by the puppets, but on a podium at the side are the narrator who provides all the voices and the musician who plays a samisen.

In East Asia, whether we are thinking of the Indonesian Wayang, the Vietnamese water puppets, the Burmese marionettes, or the Cambodian shadow figures, the musicians are omnipresent. The importance of music can vary immensely. In the Greek Karaghiozis shadow show a popular singer is often hired to accompany the show, and it is he who draws the audience as much as the puppets.

Music is a key element of many street puppet performances. Here the music is as much a way of drawing attention to the performance as part of the performance itself. The voice modifier, or swazzle, used by many street performers (including the Pulcinella or guarattella of Naples), was another way in which the showman summoned an audience, since the sound carries a long way – and this too might be regarded as a sort of musical instrument.

In eighteenth and nineteenth-century Iberia a musician sometimes played a violin whilst holding up his cloak, thus making an improvised stage, inside which was a boy who operated the glove puppets. The Planchette puppet was also extremely popular. In this case the musician, traditionally often a bag-pipe player or playing a fiddle or a hurdy-gurdy had the puppets mounted on a string, one end of which was attached to a small post whilst the other was tied to his knee, so that tensioning the string would make the puppets dance.

Today there are many street buskers combining playing a musical instrument with a marionette. There are also those who simply turn on some recorded music and operate puppets to that. Amongst what were originally street shows, the English Punch and Judy performer was nearly always accompanied by a ‘bottler’. One of his jobs was to make sure that the audience all put something in the cup and did not sneak off without contributing. He also could help drum up an audience (literally with a drum), but usually had a musical instrument, often a set of pan pipes which he wore hung round his neck and used more to accompany the show. In addition he sometimes might exchange conversation with Punch, but probably not to the same extent as the musician who was part of the Petrushka show. In this type of situation the musician could also be of value in making more intelligible the speech of Punch or Petrushka by repeating what had been said. In a similar way the musician or musicians who are an inseparable part of the Brazilian Mamulengo performance are as much of an attraction as the puppets. Sadly, today economic pressures – the need to earn a living – have meant that the musician is not necessarily part of the show any more. The Kheimh Shab Bazi of Iran also has its very active musicians who both provide music and interact with the puppets, especially the irrepressible Mobarak who enjoys such tricks as pissing over the audience.

The travelling marionette theatres of the nineteenth century always had music, often provided by a member of the family. This was the case in much of Europe. On the fairgrounds the booths and portable theatres generally had a parade space in front where a small performance might be given to attract

audiences. This could be provided by live performers or sometimes by a small glove-puppet stage where two puppets might be engaged in a lively fight, as shown in William Hogarth's picture of a booth at Southwark Fair (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: William Hogarth, *Southwark Fair*, 1734, etching and engraving, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 91.172 (Licence: CC0).

There were also musicians, generally equipped with brass instruments, to make a loud noise and indicate that the show was about to begin and in some cases these might also process through the town as a form of publicity similar to the old circus parades. Later in the century companies might set up an organ to produce mechanical music which could compete with the increasing number of noisy sideshows, and sometimes economise on the cost of musicians. A large English fit-up such as Thomas Holden's generally travelled with a pianist who was their musical director. His job was to hire musicians locally, select the music and distribute band parts. At one point the Holden family had a dozen musicians and the size of the band was something they boasted of in their publicity. Usually when musicians were hired, they had to be 'two-

handed', which meant capable of playing more than one instrument. There was a distinction between outside music for the parade and music used to accompany the show where something more harmonious was needed. Music itself, as in the minor theatres, meant both overtures and interval music, music to accompany specifically exciting, romantic or tragic moments thus creating atmosphere to back up the action, and music in the form of leit-motifs or themes related to certain characters.

An interesting survival of the use of music during a performance is the mechanical piano that accompanies the Opera dei Pupi in Sicily. This is generally operated by a young member of the puparo's (puppeteer's) family and has about a dozen perforated rolls for different tunes. The most appropriate for the situation is selected and the handle is turned according to the mood of the scene – very slowly for the more elegiac mode and very fast for an exciting single combat or battle scene (there the music is enhanced by the stamping on the ground of a wooden clog that the puparo puts on.)

Sound produced by the puppets themselves is another element. Percussive rhythm is especially noticeable on the glove puppet stage. For example, drummers and cymbal players can be seen on the Punch and Judy stage. Many fights, especially with Pulcinella in Italy, are carefully choreographed according to rhythms set up by the effect of two sticks meeting, sticks banging wooden heads, the playboard or the wooden side of the stage, and in some cases this is reinforced by the puppet banging its wooden head on the playboard, and these sounds vary according to differing degrees of resonance. In other cases, the puppet is specially designed to produce sound. In the Congo there are puppets provided with human form or features, notably a wooden horn that is played as it is carried.

In a more experimental vein, the post-Bauhaus experiments in puppetry of the Kassel art school in the 1950s involved marionettes of a totally abstract nature constructed of wood, each piece carefully designed to produce a certain note or tone. These sounds could then be coordinated to create a piece of music as the puppets moved on the stage and one piece of wood encountered another. In more recent years the music group TAM from Padua has created a blend of music, light and painting with a distinct puppet flavour. In one piece the stage is occupied by musical instruments (mostly strings) but no humans, and these instruments become what are effectively puppets and are played from the wings by means of strings attached to the them. At the same time a visual narrative is created on the spot with live painting on the computer which is projected onto the action on the stage.

Much of this reflects one of the directions in which modern puppetry is developing, moving towards a dramaturgy of visual images, light and music all closely bound together and in this particular show music and puppet have coalesced perfectly. The slogan of the TAM company is: 'La scena è lo spazio. L'azione è il tempo. Ci muoviamo come note su uno spartito musicale, come segni sulla tela di un pittore.' (The stage is the space. The action is time. We move there like notes on a musical score, like brush strokes on a painter's canvas.)³

³ <http://www.tamteatromusica.it> (accessed 11 May 2016).