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VINCENZO BELLINI'S LA SONNAMBULA: A CLINICAL CASE ON STAGE

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SUMMARY

BELLINI'S LA SONNAMBULA: A CASE STUDY

Vincenzo Bellini's La Sonnambula, staged on March 6, 1831 at the Teatro Carcano in Milan, is a single fixed point within an "expressive hypersystem" that portrays the subject in several artistic languages: theater, music, painting, ballet and literature. This essay suggests a possible constellation around the topic of sleepwalking, by reconstructing a horizon of intertextual meaning. What follows is a brief survey of the contemporary staging of Bellini's Sonnambula, with a special focus on Federico Tiezzi's direction in 2000 at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino.

Vincenzo Bellini's La sonnambula: *a clinical case on stage*

On March 6, 1831, the staging of Vincenzo Bellini's and Felice Romani's *La sonnambula* at the Teatro Carcano in Milan was a smashing success.

> *On leaving the theater, we're still stunned by the rounds of applause, shouts, hubbub, hurrahs*[1]*. Most of today's singers, in the waking state, manage to put their listeners to sleep; here it's just the opposite, the singers are asleep and the public is awake, very attentive and enthusiastic*[2]*.*

Key words: Vincenzo Bellini - La sonnambula - Sleepwalking - Hypersystem - Opera - Stage direction - Federico Tiezzi

Given that such a felicitous outcome depended primarily on the inspiration of the authors and the skills of the artists involved (primarily Giuditta Pasta and Giovanni Battista Rubini), the appeal that a topic like sleepwalking was able to have at that time should not be underestimated.
In the first part of this paper I reconstruct the expressive hypersystem or, in other words, the semantic constellation in which Bellini's *La Sonnambula* stands as a fixation point, or as one of the possible aggregates we usually call "subject." In the second part I give a brief rundown of the contemporary staging of *La Sonnambula*, focussing especially on Federico Tiezzi's interpretation in December of 2000, for the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino.
In musicology studies on lyric opera we sometimes come across the category of "expressive hypersystem": to begin with, Fabrizio Della Seta, in his reconstruction of nineteenth century music in Italy and France, sees it as one of the main features of the time[3]. In essence, it is a transmedia system in which a topic or subject takes shape on multiple media platforms: literature, painting, theater, ballet, music. Clearly, "the transferability of the same subject into different areas bears witness to its importance and cultural significance"[4]. So writes Emilio Sala in his study on the theme of madness in romantic opera, where he analyzes, by identifying some of its "fixed stars" and "privileged paths," with the aim of outlining a "possible constellation" within the firmament of "operatic madness"[5]. The "expressive hypersystem" category already appears in Sala's reflection on Verdi's *Traviata*, in his reference to the "reconstruction of a horizon of meaning" that transcends the boundaries of the work, its genesis and reception: "It should be understood as a sort of intertextual complex or indeed myth (if, with Lévi-Strauss, 'we define myth as consisting of all its versions') whose reconstruction-interpretation will have repercussions for the understanding of Verdi's opera"[6].

So what is the expressive hypersystem to which *La Sonnambula* belongs, its firmament, the context from which it draws life and to which it restores it?

Somnambulism had been a fashionable topic ever since the mid-eighteenth century: books, encyclopedias and popular almanacs had made it a very timely topic, seen as pertaining to the "realm of the marvelous," to recall a suggestive term coined by Clara Gallini[7]. What I at once wish to emphasize is that the female somnambulist, or woman with a sleep disorder, became over the years a cultural institution with a primary social function. And her bond with a male hypnotist was, in this sense, fundamental:

> *The ill sleepwalker undergoes a transformation of healing, and eventually becomes a healer and seer who establishes a new and stable collaborative relationship with the hypnotist. [...] The perfect hypnotist must be in full possession of his psychophysical faculties, and so it is better that he be a man of youthful or virile age who is given neither to gluttony nor to sexual excess and maintains an absolute spiritual calm*[8].

Nineteenth-century cities were full of a wide range of sick people, all potential customers for the new pairs of "miracles" that, by placing themselves outside of conventional medicine, catered to the unrelenting needs of rich and poor alike. Here in the so-called "sleepwalkers' studios," private clinics catering to the most varied public, it sufficed to place a sick person's lock of hair or item of clothing in the sleepwalker's hands to enable her, naturally in a state of trance, to envision the patient's internal organs and intuit the symptoms of his or her illness[9]. However, the trance did not elicit any clear statement, and this was where the hypnotist came in, to interpret and decode the extraordinary informational magma that flowed from his female collaborator.

The contract stipulated by this "fixed pair" was very profitable, though it was the male hypnotist who kept control. "The 'will' behind

the management of the fluid was always a male 'power,'" women accepted becoming the slaves of their hypnotists, "they love this dependency, solicit it, seek it, because paradoxically it allows them to take an active role. They enter the world of influential people, speak their language, take the place of notables with eminent roles, politicians and above all doctors, masters of body and soul"[10].

It isn't hard to imagine the dim view that official medicine took toward this practice, but I'm neither competent nor interested here in judging the right and wrong of it, above all because the whole history of hypnotism has been rife with the perennially unresolved tensions between truth and fiction. But one thing is certain: the word "somnambulist" no longer referred exclusively to sleepwalkers, women who walked in their sleep, but also to those who – through the development of particular techniques – came to play a socially recognized role.

In perusng the nineteenth-century manual of Francesco Guidi, Professor of Magnetology, we can see where and how these practices took root: in a nutshell, and beyond all doubt, we can affirm that the Italian homeland of hypnotism was Piedmont and, specifically, Turin:

> *Piedmont has been in the last ten years* [Guidi wrote in 1860] *the only part of Italy where hypnotism has been able to breathe, and since, as we've said, it is a science of progress, indeed the best type of progress, perforce it is in need of freedom, and in Piedmont, in the shadow of free association and a free press, granted by the Constitution of House of Savoy, it could be freely studied, experimented and applied by zealous magnetophiles and learned magnetist physicians, among whom Doctors Borgna, Coddé, Gatti and Peano stand out*[11].

This was the situation in Piedmont. And in Lombardy? We know that in the mid-nineteenth century hypnotism began to be less marginal, prompting curiosity and debates in different circles, including theaters. In 1848, for example, after a successful tour in Turin and Genoa, the French Lassagne had performed none other than in the foyer of La Scala in Milan, having as his partner a very popular somnambulist:

Madame Prudence. These were years when foreign works began to be translated, the first practical technical treatises appeared, and the city's cultural elite increasingly explored the world of magnetic experiments. Among the first spectators of the Lassagne-Prudence pair was Alessandro Manzoni, who, intrigued, a few years later invited another couple then in vogue to perform at his home: Zanardelli with his daughter Elisa.

What I'm interested in focussing on, again from the perspective of expressive hyper-system, is the fact that the practices related to hypnotism and sleepwalking soon became the stuff of "spectacle" (from the Latin spectare, "to watch"). The techniques developed in the intimacy of the somnambulistic studio could be exhibited, spied on and watched by an ever-increasing crowd of spectators. And this in two ways: on the one hand, the professional practitioners themselves (such as the aforementioned couples Lassagne-Prudence and Zanardelli-Elisa) envlivened the bourgeois salons or the stages of the public theaters with their performances; on the other hand, the specialized entertainment industry, having recognized the subject's power of attraction, conveyed a new tributary into the vast sea of mass entertainment. It was certainly odd that the stages of that era simultaneously hosted both real sleepwalkers and fake ones, both professionals and actresses. As for the real sleepwalkers: after the arrival of the Lassagne-Prudence couple on the stages of Turin, Genoa and Milan, Guidi was the first to popularize this kind of spectacle throughout Italy.

In the Carnival of 1851 he performed at the Wauxhall in Turin with the sleepwalker Amerigo, while in Genoa, with a certain Erminia, he held 9 public sessions between 1852 and 1853. And his example was soon imitated: in Bologna and later in Rome a certain Pilati practiced the trade, assisted by the sleepwalker Anna de Cornelio. In addition, in the 1880s two other couples toured the Italian theatrical circuit: the Sisti and the Castagnola spouses. Not to mention the aforementioned Zanardelli family, active for two generations.

> *Zanardelli had to have a very lively sense of spectacle. It was no coincidence that he concluded his theatrical performances with projections of a colossal magic lantern, the Agiscope, which however did not yet meet the favor of an audience whose enthusiasm was all for Emma*[12].

Whether born in the space of a heterodox experimentation or in the exclusivity of a parlor, the hypnotic marvel invaded the theater stages of the masses: illusionism and mesmerism vied for the public up to the advent of the new wonder-producing machine, cinema.
Let's move on now to the "fake" somnabulists, for us of more immediate interest: we said that the specialized entertainment industry throughout the nineteenth century – in a clear response to the social and cultural input – billed the sleepwalkers among its main attractions. Sara Hibberd, referring to the definition of the philosopher Pierre Maine de Biran, speaks of the great popularity of "dream phenomena"[13]. After all, for the spectators the female somnambulists might be more attractive than their crazy "cousins," as they were less frequent in the plots of lyric opera. Moreover, for the authors of the librettos and musical scores, always prey to the whims of censorship, the fact that the female somnambulists were much less transgressive than a classic mad woman – as with the minimal erotic charge of characters like Bellini's Amina – could be a fair advantage.
In her analysis of Hérold's *Somnambule* and, more generally, of early nineteenth century Paris, Hibberd emphasizes that in 1827 sleepwalkers wandered freely on Parisian stages, "bewitching their audiences"[14].
Sometimes on the stage – and now I refer to Italy – one even chanced to encounter a limelit hypnotist: in this regard I insert the sketch Giuseppe Bertoja made for the great eight-part Ballet *Cagliostro ossia il magnetizzatore* (fig.1), staged in its world debut in March of 1852 at the Gran Teatro La Fenice in Venice.
Following is a chart that lists a series of texts (comédie-vaudeville, dramas set to music, ballets and pantomimes, poems etc.) all more or less directly linked to our topic – Bellini's *La sonnambula* - and all part of that "firmament of somnambulism" that we are reconstructing.

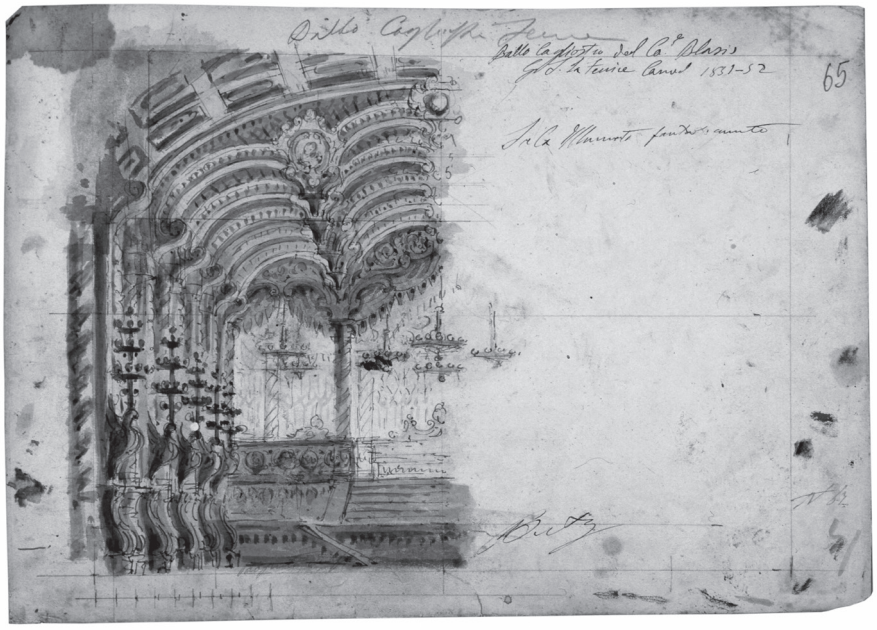

Fig. 1. Scene sketch by Giuseppe Bertoja for *Cagliostro ossia il magnetizzatore*, ballet performed on the stage of the Teatro La Fenice in Venice in 1852, © Archivio Fotografico - Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia.

YEAR	TITLE	AUTHORS	VENUE
1797	*La sonnambula* (music drama)	Luigi Piccinni (music)	
1800	*La sonnambula* (merry musical farce)	Giuseppe Foppa (libretto), Ferdinando Paër (music)	Venice, Teatro Venier in San Benedetto
1805	*La finta sonnambula* (ballet)	Giulio Viganò (music and choreography)	Venice, Teatro La Fenice
1819	*La somnambule* (comédie vaudeville)	Eugène Scribe, Germain Delavigne	Paris, Théâtre du Vaudeville

1820	*L'amant somnambule, ou le mystère* (comédie vaudeville)	MM. A. Philippe, Saint-Ange Martin	Paris, Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin
1822	*Le somnambule* (poem)	Alfred De Vigny	Paris, Pélicier
1824	*Il sonnambulo* (melodramma semiserio)	Felice Romani (libretto), Michele Carafa (musica)	Milano, Teatro alla Scala
1824	*Amina, ovvero l'innocenza perseguitata* (semi-serious operetta)	Felice Romani (libretto), Giuseppe Rastrelli (music)	Milan, Teatro alla Scala
1824	*La petite somnambule* (comédie vaudeville)	Charles Dupeuty, Ferdinand De Villeneuve	Paris, Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin
1825	*Amina, ovvero l'innocenza perseguitata* (semi-serious operetta)	Felice Romani (libretto), Antonio D'Antoni (music)	Trieste, Gran Teatro
1825	*Amina ovvero l'orfanella da Ginevra* (comic sentimental operetta)	Felice Romani (libretto), Carlo Valentini (music)	Napoli, Teatro Nuovo
1825	*La dame blanche* (opéra comique)	Eugène Scribe (libretto), François-Adrien Boieldieu (musica)	Paris, Théâtre national de l'Opéra Comique
1827	*La Somnambule, ou l'arrivée d'un nouveau seigneur* (ballet)	Eugène Scribe (libretto), Jean Pierre Aumer (choreography), Ferdinand Hérold (music)	Paris, Académie Royale de Musique
1827	*La villageoise somnambule, ou les deux fiancées* (comédie vaudeville)	Dartois, Dupin	Paris, Théâtre des Variétés
1827	*Héloïse, ou la nouvelle somnambule* (comédie)	Théaulon de Lambert	Paris, Théâtre du Vaudeville
1827	*La Somnambule du Pont-aux-choux* (folie-vaudeville)	Pellisier, Hubert	Paris, Théâtre de la Gaîté

1827	*La petite somnambule, ou coquetterie et gourmandise* (vaudeville)	L'Endormi	Paris, Théâtre Comte
1828	*La sonnambula e il pittore* (comedy)	Barone G. Carlo Cosenza	Naples, Teatro dei Fiorentini
1830	*La sonnambula* (ballo)	Giulio Viganò	Torino, Regio Teatro
1830	*Il sonnambulo* (semi-serious operetta)	Felice Romani (libretto), Luigi Ricci (music)	Rome, Teatro Valle
1830	*La donna bianca di Avenello* (comic operetta)	Gaetano Rossi (libretto), Stefano Pavesi (music)	Milan, Teatro alla Canobbiana
1831	*La sonnambula* (semi-serious operetta)	Felice Romani (libretto), Vincenzo Bellini (music)	Milan, Teatro Carcano
1832	*L'orfanella di Ginevra* (melodrama set to music)	Giacomo Feretti (libretto), Luigi Ricci (music)	Verona, Teatro Filarmonico
1832	*La sonnambula* (ballet pantomime)	Federico Massini	Verona, Teatro Filarmonico
1832	*La sonnambula (serious ballet)*	Giuseppe Sorrentino	Parma, Teatro Regio
1833	*The somnambulist or the phantom of the village* (dramatic entertainment)	W. Thomas Moncrieff	London, Covent Garden
1834	*La vera sonnambula* (ballet)	Antonio Cortesi	Turin, Teatro Regio
1836	*La parrucca del Conte Mitraglia, ossia la parodia della Sonnambula* (opera)	Giuseppe Barberi, Paolo Giaramicca	Naples, Teatro La Fenice
1842	*Il fantasma* (opera)	Felice Romani (libretto), Salvatore Agnelli (musica)	Naples, Teatro La Fenice

1845	*Il fantasma* (semi-serious opera)	Felice Romani (libretto), Giuseppe Persiani (music)	Vienna, Imperial Court Theater
1845	*Mémoires d'une somnambule* (poem)	Jules Lacroix	Paris, Alexandre Cadot
1855	*Il sonnambulo* (serious opera)	Napoleone Pietrucci (libretto), Angelo Agostini (music)	Padua, Teatro Concordi

The chart's data are a first attempt to reconstruct the expressive hypersystem of Bellini's *Sonnambula*. The network can, of course, be expanded indefinitely, to where, for example, it crosses over into the constellations of "madness": it is no coincidence that Sarah Hibberd, in her contribution, beside the many female somnabulists, places *La Folle de Glaris* (Sauvage/Payer), *Nina, ou la folle par amour* (Milon/Persuis), and *Macbeth* (Rouget de Lisle/Chelard), etc.[15].

In another context it's interesting to verify the coincidences and inconsistencies among these works, identifying possible influences and mapping a chart of (subject) variants.

At the end of the first part I propose a brief sally within the figurative arts: the following are four works devoted to the topic of sleepwalking, further demonstrating how this was transposed, transversally, into all artistic languages (figures 2-5).

I now move on to the second part of my reflection, which treats the contemporary staging of the *Sonnambula*. In 2015 the Documentation Center for Bellini Studies (University of Catania) and the Bellini Foundation started to publish a new digital journal (*Bollettino di Studi Belliniani*), which, under the direction of Fabrizio Della Seta (University of Pavia-Cremona), has now become a reference point for scholars of this composer born in the shadow of Mount Etna. In the first volume (2015) there is a review by Emanuele Senici devoted to the contemporary staging of the *Sonnambula*.

Figs. 2-5. Gustave Courbet, *La somnambule*, 1865; Paul-Édouard Rosset-Granger, *La somnambule*, 1897; John Everett Millais, *The Somnambulist*, 1871; Max Pirner, *The Somnambulist*, 1878

Senici's article reviews two DVDs that appeared on the market in 2013: one is conducted by Bepi Morassi for La Fenice di Venezia (April-May 2012); the other comments on the staging by Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito for the Stuttgart Staatsoper (January 2012).
Senici takes the occasion to make a "general reflection on the position of the *Sonnambula* in present-day opera and theatrical culture"[16] and gives us a series of testimonies of discomfort towards the work, by both professionals (such as the singer Natalie Dessay) and mere spectators and commentators. This discomfort, according to Senici, derives first of all from the genre to which *La sombambula* belongs, that of semi-serious opera. The "optimistic and somewhat naive" view of the relationships between human beings, generations and social classes makes semi-serious opera an especially alien genre for today's sensibility"[17].
According to Senici, Morassi's and Wieler-Morabito's direction belong to a theatrical context that for decades has manifested a "puzzled" attitude towards *La Sonnambula*, an opera that – now more than ever – requires some attempt at mediation between sta-

ge and audience. A challenge that the unrestrained *Regietheater* eagerly takes up.

I refer to the stagings that from the 2000s onwards have became most representative: from Marco Arturo Marelli's for the Staatsoper of Vienna in 2001, in which Amina casts off her white nightgown and, sheathed in an elegant red velvet dress, sings her downstage cabaletta

"Ah! non giunge uman pensiero" (Ah! No human thought arrives); to Mary Zimmermann's for the New York Met in 2009, set in a rehearsal room where the characters are working on the staging of the opera (in the cast the exceptional pair Florez-Dessay).

Federico Tiezzi's Florence production in 2000 was a more rigorously intellectual operation, where the whole thing boiled down to a "clinical case"[18]. In his direction notes Tiezzi tells of having been impressed above all by the figure of Count Rodolfo and his words, as in Scene Six of Act One, where Teresa sings "*Ma… il sole tramonta: è d'uopo partir. […] Che l'ora s'avvicina in cui si mostra il tremendo fantasma*" (But ... the sun is setting: I must go. [...] Since the hour is approaching in which the terrible ghost appears). The Chorus responds "È vero! È vero!" (It's true! It's true!)." Rodolfo, disoriented, asks "*Quale fantasma?*" (What ghost?). Everyone answers "È un mistero. *Un oggetto d'orror!*" (It's a mystery. An object of horror!) Rodolfo "*Follie!*" (Madness!) Then the choir sings its set piece:

> *A fosco cielo, a notte bruna, al fioco raggio d'incerta luna, al cupo suono di tuon lontano, dal colle al pian un'ombra appar. In bianco avvolta lenzuol cadente, col crin disciolto, con occhio ardente, qual densa nebbia dal vento mossa, avanza, ingrossa, immensa par*[19].
>
> (Under a dark sky, on a dark night, the faint ray of an uncertain moon, the gloomy sound of distant thunder, from the hill to the plain a shadow appears. Enveloped in a white sheet, her hair loosed, with burning eye, like a dense fog moved by the wind, she advances, looms into view, seeming immense.)

Rodolfo, not at all frightened, replies: "*Ve la dipinge, ve la figura la vostra cieca credulità*" (You're painted there, your blind credulity portrayed). The Count comes from a sophisticated, civilized world and can only stand in contrast to the peasant world shut off in its idyll and prey to naive fears. Hence he alone, as a man of science, can play the role of *Deus ex machina* and impose a decisive turn on the event. In Scene Seven of Act Two he in fact explains *coram populo* "*V'han certuni che dormendo vanno intorno come desti, favellando, rispondendo come vengono richiesti, e chiamati son sonnambuli dall'andar e dal dormir*" (There are some who while asleep walk about as if awake, speaking, responding as requested, and they are called sleepwalkers by virtue of their walking and sleeping). If Amina, then, is sleepwalking and Rodolfo is the scientific resolver of the tale, the whole plot can be read as the exposition of a clinical case; or at least, this was Tiezzi's interpretation.

> *If I spoke of a "clinical case" – the director states in his notes – "it's because I wanted to make a point: if, I told myself, we see the story through Amina's eyes, it then becomes the story of a soul seeking to wake itself, its conscience. And, consequently, if Rodolfo is, so to speak, a kind of Sigmund Freud, he becomes the maieutic midwife of this liberation of Amina's from her ghosts, her sleep*[20].

And in fact sleep, or rather, Amina's dream, seems to frame the whole situation up to the last scene. At the beginning of the opera, before the conductor strikes up the opening bars of the score, we see the heroine dressed in white, lying downstage on a fake lawn. Amina gets up, reaches the red Vanity Fair armchair placed at center stage; she makes a stylized gesture towards the English-style home-clinic that looms in the background, which promptly lights up on the inside, then curls up on the Frau armchair that gradually sinks. The music begins and another Amina can be seen curled up inside the house[21]. All that follows is a dream in which a chromatic progression, typical of Tiezzi's style, becomes significant.

The green lawn of Act One indicates the budding of love, with a visual reference to Pina Bausch's *1980* and the Peter Weir film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). The wheat field that appears in correspondence to the original passage inside the tavern (Act 1 Scene 8) represents the ripening of love; the dominant color goes from green to yellow, with a touch of red given by the sofa where Amina is stretched out asleep; here openly inspired by Andrew Wyeth's painting *Christina's World*. Lastly, the white glacier, clearly related to Caspar David Friedrich's *Sea of Ice*, alludes to the sublimation of love.

One last color is fundamental in this staging: gray. After Amina, at the end of the opera, has finished singing her wonderful lament "*Ah! Non credea mirarti sì presto estinto, o fiore*" (Ah! I didn't think I'd see you wither so soon, oh flower). Rodolfo wakes the somnambulist, now curled up again on the red Frau: a drum roll and Amina is awake. Meanwhile, from above, a gray bourgeois den descends.

The grayness of reality corresponds to the multi-colored dream. "So do we prefer a conscious Amina who finds herself in a gray reality" – Tiezzi wonders in his notes – "or do we prefer her to still be immersed in her dream"[22]? This is a question that, even today, challenges each of us.

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