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Singing and Dramatic Gesture

Action and Singing in Late 18th- and Early 19th-Century England

Robert Toft

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, action played an important role in the performance of vocal music. Operatic singers such as Pacchierotti, Vernon, Kelly, Pasta, and Grassini received praise for their ability to associate sentiment and action. Their depiction of passion through voice and gesture allowed them to please the eyes as well as the ears of the audience, and the most effective singers perfectly identified themselves with the characters they represented.¹ Several writers of the period described the powerful impression the best performers made on listeners. Isaac Nathan, for

¹ On this point, see, in addition to the passages quoted below, Richard Mackenzie Bacon, *Elements of Vocal Science* (London, 1824), ed. Edward Foreman (Champaign: Pro Musica Press, 1966), 40, 117; Isaac Nathan, *Musurgia Vocalis* (London, 1836), 74-75, 246-47, 250; and Manuel García the Younger, *New Treatise on the Art of Singing* (London, 1857), 64, 74.

example, provides a particularly vivid account of Fanny Kelly's (1790–1882) performance in *The Witch of Dorncleugh*, an opera produced at the Lyceum Theatre in the early 1830s. Nathan focuses on the lament Kelly sang over the body of Brown:

The correspondence between the hopeless misery of her looks, the utter wretchedness that breathed throughout her whole deportment, and the tender melancholy of her voice were such, that no eye could behold unmoved, nor ear listen to untouched. Her plaint of sorrow was given with true genuine feeling . . . At the conclusion of her song, Miss Kelly did not remain without the appearance of animation, as many, that shall be here nameless, would have done, with a seeming desire to say, "Don't distress yourselves, good people, I was only in fun." On the contrary, so natural were her gestures and manner, that unbroken sympathy attended her efforts to the last.²

As Nathan demonstrates, the best performers remained animated throughout the song, and this fundamental principle of operatic singing is echoed by other writers of the period. Maria Anfossi, for instance, describes the importance of action in the following way:

The dramatic singer who possesses genius, does not confine the effect of musical declamation to the expression of the words and notes of his part; but even when he is silent, every motion, every look, tends to enhance the sentiments which the symphonies express for him. On the stage he is never inactive, because he has perfectly identified himself with the character he wishes to represent. While he is singing he does not forget he is an actor, and in the most busy scenes his singing will be still more admired.³

Clearly, gesture was a powerful tool,⁴ so much so that it even helped singers overcome the barrier of a foreign language. Lord Edgcumbe,

² Nathan, *Musurgia Vocalis*, 256.

³ Maria Anfossi, *Trattato teorico-pratico sull'arte del canto . . . A Theoretical and Practical Treatise on the Art of Singing* (London, [1840]), 70.

⁴ The comments on action by R.A. Smith, in his *An Introduction to Singing* (Edinburgh, 1825), 2, are exceptional: "All affected gesticulation should be avoided. Gesticulation of any kind is no addition to graceful singing; it only betrays the self-conceit of the singer, and infallibly exposes him to the contempt of persons of taste

remembering Pacchierotti's recitative, commented that "those who did not understand the language could not fail to comprehend, from his countenance, voice, and action, every sentiment he expressed."⁵ Indeed, incapacity as an actor seriously undermined an operatic career, for Antonio Sapia (1792-1851), despite the urgings of his friends, resisted attempting the stage "until he had acquired a delivery that was at least inoffensive, and a mode of action calculated to impress and not disgust."⁶ Sapia gained his proficiency in acting not by studying with a teacher of singing but by working with a professor of elocution, the eminent Benjamin Humphrey Smart (?1786-1872).

Many writings on elocution survive, and today we may recover the principles and techniques of action from the very same books that singers of the period studied. The principles recorded in these books formed the basis of action both within and outside the theater;⁷ however, in the concert room and church a much more restrained use of action was appropriate. William Gardiner describes the three different approaches of Giuditta Pasta (1798-1865):

It is only in the theatre that Madame Pasta is seen to the greatest advantage; she seems out of her element in any other place—she wants the area of the stage to move upon, its attendant bustle and scenery to excite her to action. There, and there only, can we hear the powers of her voice. In the concert-room she is comparatively cold and lifeless. The wildness of her mind, like the leopard's eye, is looking for motion, upon which her energy and imagination depend. In the church she is more animated than in the concert-room.⁸

and judgement. Tosi, an Italian writer, recommends singing before a mirror in order to correct any bad habits." Other writers certainly object to poorly conceived action, but none of them suggest that gesture is foreign to singing.

⁵ Lord Edgcumbe, *Musical Reminiscences* (London, 1834), 14.

⁶ *Oxberry's Dramatic Biography and Histrionic Anecdotes*, vol. 1 (London, 1825), 254.

⁷ Confirmation of this point is found in Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia* (London, 1806), 499, where Austin informs his readers that the fifteenth chapter of his book ("Application of Symbols, and Symbolic Letters") enumerates the "great mass" of gestures used in both oratory and the theater.

⁸ William Gardiner, *The Music of Nature* (London, 1832), 145.

This description of Pasta's varying styles of action is typical of the period. Singers subdued their action in the concert room and church but did not dispense with it. In fact, Maria Anfossi advised singers to make the expression of the countenance always correspond with the subject of the words, but in a manner much less marked in the drawing room than would be proper on the stage.⁹

One type of action singers employed in the drawing room has been documented by Thomas Bolton (c1760–1820). Bolton notes that by holding a music book in the left hand (presumably while singing in a drawing room) the right hand would be free for action.¹⁰ But the action Bolton had in mind seems quite rudimentary, because in one of his songs for practice he suggests only the most basic kind of gesticulation in which the performer, obviously singing without holding a music book, alternately clasps the hands and spreads the arms (see the last two lines of Ex. 1). According to manuals on elocution, however, action outside the theater was much more complex than this, and one of the best sources for reconstructing the practices is Gilbert Austin's (1752–1837) *Chironomia* (London, 1806).¹¹ Although Austin's book is not directed to singers, he does discuss some facets of singing, and he praises theatrical singers, particularly Madame Grassini for availing herself of the "opportunity for great variety, grace, and expression in gesture" in Peter von Winter's opera *Il ratto di Proserpina* (London première, 1804).¹²

⁹ Anfossi, *Art of Singing*, 79.

¹⁰ Thomas Bolton, *A Treatise on Singing* (London, ?1810), 12.

¹¹ For a list of other sources, see the bibliography in Dene Barnett's detailed study, *The Art of Gesture: the Practices and Principles of 18th-Century Acting* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1987). A number of important 19th-century books on elocution are treated in Frederick W. Haberman, "English Sources of American Elocution," in *History of Speech Education in America*, ed. Karl R. Wallace (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954), 105–26, and late 18th-century writers on delivery are discussed in Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), ch. 4.

¹² Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia* (London, 1806), 248.

**Ex. 1. Thomas Bolton, *A Treatise on Singing* (London, ?1810),
14-15**

Andante

Right hand exalted

In Peace Love tunes the Shepherd's reed, In war he mounts the war-rior's
steed, In Halls in gay at-tire is seen, In Ham-lets dan-cing
on the green Love rules the Court, the Camp the grove, And Men be-
low, and Saints a-bove, Love rules the Court, the Camp, the Grove, And
Men be-low and Saints a-bove For Love is Heav'n and Heav'n is
Love For Love is Heav'n and Heav'n is Love.

Full inspiration

Hands clasp'd Arms spread

Clasp'd Spread

+ = breath mark

Right at the outset of his book, Austin quotes from ancient and modern authors to establish the degree to which oratorical and theatrical gesture differs. Theatrical players, he relates, have always employed a stronger, more passionate, and diversified form of action than orators, who restrain theatrical freedom within the moderate bounds of oration.¹³ Nonetheless, both groups used a common set of gestures to move their listeners, and even though actors gesticulated with much more splendor, the persuasiveness of all speakers was augmented by action which was designed to enforce, illustrate, and adorn discourse.¹⁴

Action refers, of course, to the demeanor of the whole body. The head and countenance hold the principal rank, for the expression of the countenance portrays the most vivid image of the sentiments of the speaker.¹⁵ But it was the hands and arms that formed the grand instrument of gesture, and Cicero called the flexible line of the arm, hand, and fingers the weapon of the orator.¹⁶ The rest of the body accompanied the action of the hands and arms in a way that ensured a graceful temperance.

Orators achieved grace in standing by placing the weight of the body on one leg, and this allowed the other limb to be held in a relaxed manner so that it was ready for immediate change.¹⁷ Example 2 shows the two basic positions of the feet, the first illustration depicting the feet advancing from the first position to the second and the second illustration showing the feet retiring back to the first position. From the position of rest (see Ex. 3), motions of the arms and hands are made within the horizontal and vertical spheres shown in Example 4, and common positions of the hands are illustrated in Example 5. One hand is usually advanced before the other and is elevated differently. The advanced hand performs the principal gesture, and the retired hand, normally placed a whole position lower, assumes a subordinate role, performing its action with less energy.¹⁸

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 450.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 385.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 375.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 295, 301.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 388–89.

Occasionally, however, particularly in strong expression, the accompanying hand may imitate the action of the principal hand and be equally elevated.¹⁹ Either the right or the left hand is used for the principal gesture,²⁰ and as long as there is a direct connection between the sentiments expressed, the hand which begins the principal gesture continues to perform it.²¹ Under certain conditions, however, the principal gesture may be transferred from one hand to the other, especially in passages where objects are presented before the eyes of the listeners.²²

Ex. 2. Positions of the feet; Austin, *Chironomia* (London, 1806), plate 1



Advance to R. 2



Retire to R. 1

¹⁹ Ibid., 422.

²⁰ Ibid., 398ff. Austin diverges from traditional teaching in this area, for in earlier times, as Austin recognizes, gesture was made mainly with the right hand; see, for example, John Bulwer, *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand and Chironomia: or the Art of Manual Rhetoric* (London, 1644), ed. James W. Cleary (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), 233-37.

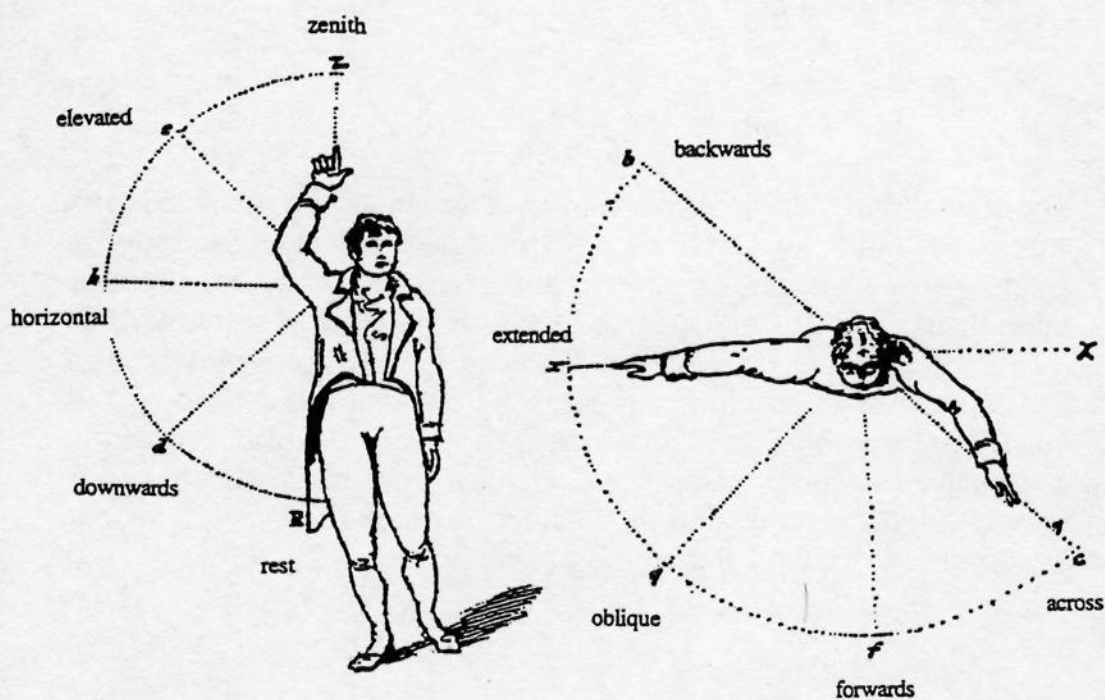
²¹ Austin, *Chironomia*, 417.

²² Ibid., 419.

**Ex. 3. Position of rest; Austin, *Chironomia* (London, 1806),
plate 2**



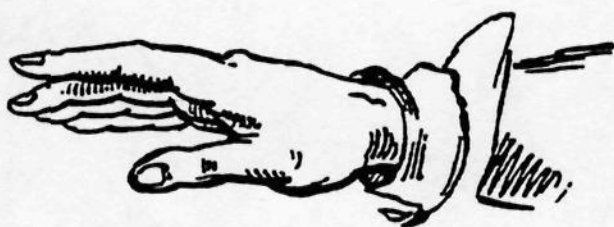
**Ex. 4. Spheres of motion; Austin, *Chironomia* (London, 1806),
plate 2**



Ex. 5. Positions of the hand; Austin, *Chironomia* (London, 1806), plate 7



Pointing



Prone



Inwards



Vertical

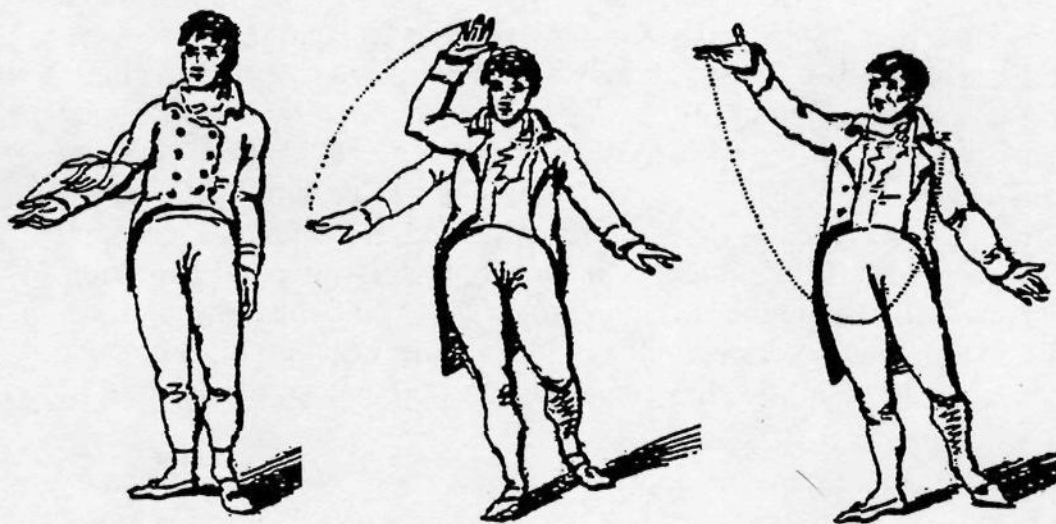
The transition from one gesture to another should be managed with ease and simplicity. The hand and arm should not, it seems, move in a direct line from one gesture to another; instead, the arm returns upon itself so that it may proceed towards the next position with an accelerated motion.²³ When transferring gesture from one hand to the other, Austin recommends allowing the advanced hand to fall quietly to rest while the hand which is to assume the principal action commences its preparation.²⁴ Each new gesture is directed to a specific physical point, and the manner in which the hand approaches this point is called the stroke of the gesture. The stroke should

²³ Ibid., 411-12.

²⁴ Ibid., 420.

fall on the accented syllable of the word to be emphasized, for it is to the eye what the force of the voice is to the ear. Naturally, the stroke will vary according to the energy of the sentiment expressed. In high passion, for example, it is marked by a strong percussion, but in more moderate states, a turn of the hand, a change of position or elevation of the arm, or a momentary arrestation of the motion within a transition will suffice. Without a stroke in the proper places, Austin warns, the hands would simply wander about sawing the air.²⁵ Drawings of pressing, recoiling, and admiration are given in Example 6.

Ex. 6. Stroke of the gesture; Austin, *Chironomia* (London, 1806), plate 9



Pressing

Recoiling

Admiration

²⁵ Ibid., 377-78.

In every well-constructed sentence, a new idea is introduced, and this may be marked by suitable action. The force of the gesture is determined by the importance of the new idea or modification introduced, and each separate clause or member of the sentence may have a distinct gesture on the principal word. In other words, each new idea requires a new gesture. However, the emphatical words in sentences are not always the ones which are principal in the grammatical sense. Nouns and verbs, though grammatically important, often express only a simple idea. Adjectives and adverbs, on the other hand, frequently express the quality of nouns and verbs, and it is on these modifiers that the principal emphasis of both voice and gesture is made; e.g., *A wise son maketh a glad father.*²⁶

A period of gesture consists of commencing, suspended, and emphatical and terminating gestures.²⁷ The period commences by raising the hand from rest to a place no higher than the downward or horizontal position of the arm.²⁸ Just prior to making the stroke on an important word, the attention of listeners is held in suspense by elevating the arm on a less important word.²⁹ These suspensions often involve contracting, withdrawing, or bending the arm so that it may be *forcibly thrust, advanced, or unbent on the emphatical word*. The ensuing stroke marks the word which expresses the predominant idea, and this emphatical gesture is generally arrested in the horizontal elevation. But the stroke may also be directed to either the highest or the lowest point of the range. Arrestation at the highest point may serve as a suspension to the next emphatical gesture (if another one follows directly), but when an emphatical gesture occurs at the close of a sentence or division of the subject, it becomes a terminating gesture.³⁰ Horizontal termination suits decision and instruction; downward termination, disapprobation and condemnation; and elevated termination, pride, high passion, and devotion.³¹ Indeed, when the last important idea has been marked, no other gesture should be

²⁶ Ibid., 435-37, 523.

²⁷ Ibid., 436.

²⁸ Ibid., 390.

²⁹ Ibid., 412-13.

³⁰ Ibid., 391-92.

³¹ Ibid., 427.

added, because this would weaken the effect. The arm then falls to rest.³²

Most gestures do not represent any particular sentiment but relate to the emotional quality of the text in a general way.³³ Action derives its significance, then, not from the gesture itself but rather from the manner in which it is applied. Sudden motions, for example, are appropriate only when the vehemence of passion urges the most rapid expression,³⁴ and these strong changes to the head, body, and lower limbs reinforce various sentiments. Horror and aversion, for instance, may be shown by forcibly withdrawing the hands, retiring the feet, throwing the body backwards, and averting the head (see Ex. 7).³⁵ In calm and moderate passages, however, orators restrain gesture,³⁶ even to the point where a slight movement of the head, a turn of the hand, or a judicious interruption of the gesture will illuminate the meaning of a passage.³⁷

In addition to providing detailed descriptions of the manner in which specific gestures gain significance, Austin presents a new method of notating action. His notation records facial expressions, the positions and motions of the head, hands, arms, and feet, as well as the force of the gesture. Austin completely annotated four texts as examples of his system, and among these, Thomas Gray's "An elegy written in a country courtyard" is of special interest to singers, for Stephen Storace had set the first two stanzas of the poem to music in the early 1780s.³⁸ If we conflate the two sources and apply Austin's gestures to Storace's setting, we can begin to understand how action might have been employed by singers in the late 18th century. As

³² Ibid., 392.

³³ Ibid., 389–90.

³⁴ Ibid., 411.

³⁵ Ibid., 424–25.

³⁶ Ibid., 442.

³⁷ Ibid., 497.

³⁸ Ibid., 524–28 and Stephen Storace, *Eight Canzonetts* (London, 1782), no.

**Ex. 7. Sudden motions; Austin, *Chironomia* (London, 1806),
plate 10**



Horror



Horror



Aversion

has been noted, singers probably learned the art of gesture from teachers of elocution, or at least that is how Antonio Sapio gained his proficiency in gesture, and the application of Austin to Storace may very well provide us with the closest view we are likely to obtain of this very important facet of the singer's art.

Austin regarded Gray's poem as one which is mainly descriptive, and he felt that discriminating gestures should be the most numer-

ous.³⁹ Discriminating gestures indicate persons and objects or they explain, extend, or modify the predominant idea. They are performed with moderate force and within the intermediate degrees of the range of gesture, that is, downwards, horizontal, and elevated.⁴⁰ Austin further described the poem as a serious one in which the changes of gesture should be made slowly.⁴¹ Storace's setting certainly reflects the serious nature of the poem, for it is marked *Largo* and begins in a minor key. Storace chose to set the first two stanzas of the poem, the stanzas which portray the atmosphere of a typical country evening, and in Example 8, I have overlain the vocal line not only with Austin's notation but also with an explanation of his symbols. The symbols above the staff refer to motions of the hands and arms, along with the expression of the countenance, and those below the staff note the positions and motions of the feet.

Austin provides detailed comments on many aspects of the poem and its action, and his explanations help us understand how gesture augmented verbal persuasion.⁴² The poem begins with the speaker listening for the sound of the curfew being struck, the sound which signals the passing of the day. At first, the eyes are turned towards the direction of the sound, the hand being presented vertically in the same direction. But the eye quickly discovers its own insufficiency, and the ear, the proper organ, is turned towards the sound, while the eyes are bent on vacancy and the hand remains vertical. The speaker's body leans forward, more or less according to the earnestness of the attention, and the feet advance to the second position. At the end of this first descriptive gesture, the hands fall to rest so that they may prepare for the next gesture. On "knell," the hands ascend in preparation for the stroke on "parting" and then descend to terminate on "Day." After leaning the head forwards and retiring the feet to the first position, the speaker uses the right hand to follow the progress of the herd as it winds slowly over the lea. The speaker then trans-

³⁹ Austin, *Chironomia*, 392.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 390–91.


⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 522.

⁴² Austin's observations appear on pages 528ff of *Chironomia*.

Ex. 8. "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day" (Storace, 1782/Austin, 1806)

Listening Right: vertical elevated oblique Left: vertical horizontal extended asc prep Both: prone elevated desc term Head forwards Right: prone horizontal forwards RH continues to the oblique and extended positions and then falls slowly to rest

Ls veq—vhx a—B pef—d F phf— q x




The Cur- few tolls, the knell of parting Day, the lowing Herd wind[s] slowly o'er the lea, the

aR2 [Advance, 2nd position] rR1 [Retire, 1st position]

LH takes up principal gesture: prone horizontal forwards LH to oblique Both: vertical elevated oblique Eyes bent on vacancy Both: natural or inwards elevated forwards Both to downwards Both rest

—phf— q B veq V B nef— d— B.R.




Plowman homeward plods his weary way, and leaves the World to darkness and to me.

Eyes round Both: prone horizontal across Both to oblique then extended Both: vertical extended forwards Both to oblique

R B phc— q— x B vef— q

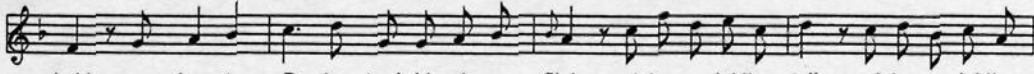
Fine



Now fades the glim'ring landscape on the sight, and all the Air a solemn stillness

Right: index pointing elevated across RH to oblique Right: retracting motion vertical elevated forwards


iee— q vef rt—



holds, save where the Beetle wheels his drony flight, and drowsy tinklings lull, and drowsy tinklings

Right: pushing or pressing motion prone horizontal forwards Rest

phf p— R *D.S. al Fine*



lull, and lull the distant Fold[s], The

aR2 [Advance, 2nd position]

fers the principal gesture from the right to the left hand, so that he may trace the homeward journey of the ploughman. Both hands unite their action on the word “weary,” and with the eyes once again bent on vacancy, the hands bring the verse to a close by moving from the elevated to the downward position before coming to rest at the end of the sentence.

The second stanza commences with gestures Austin describes as the flowing variation of continued motion, and the position adopted on “fades” prepares the arms for sweeping around the horizon. The head and eyes begin to turn to either extreme, but when the arms move from their initial position, the head and eyes precede the action of which ever hand takes the principal role. For example, if the right hand leads, the head follows its motion and turns from left to right. Both hands continue to remain active in the second line of the stanza, but in the third line, the left hand drops out. Here, the index finger points at the beetle which interrupts the solemn stillness of the air, and the eyes follow the object a little above the finger. In the last line, the word “distant” is marked by a pushing motion, and in order to prepare the hand to move forward it must first be retracted. This retraction is achieved by gradually withdrawing the hand from the position of the third line until, on the word “lull,” it has reached a suitable point of preparation. The hand is then pushed forward on “distant,” and the feet advance to the first position. On the last word, the hand quickly falls to rest.

The only real problem which arises in applying Austin’s action to Storace’s setting occurs in the last line of the second stanza. Storace chose to repeat the words “and drowsy tinklings lull,” and this requires the singer to provide appropriate gesture for each repetition. Variety in action was one of the primary goals of orators, and some singers, notably Antonio Sapio, were chastised in the musical press for the poverty of invention they showed in second and third repetitions.⁴³ I suggest that the retracting motion Austin marks on the first “lull” should be reserved for the final uttering of the word and that two distinct gestures should be made on the first two iterations of the phrase. Perhaps the right hand could remain elevated on the initial uttering of “and drowsy tinklings lull,” and a turn of the hand might suffice for marking the word “drowsy.” In the second iteration, the

⁴³ Oxberry’s *Dramatic Biography and Histrionic Anecdotes*, vol. 1 (London, 1825), 256.

hand could move from the elevated, oblique position to the horizontal, forward position, and then Austin's retracting motion could be applied to the final "lull."

Austin's annotations provide modern singers with a precise model to follow when reconstructing late 18th- and early 19th-century practices. Gesture was an integral part of delivery, and Austin's meticulous record of it enables singers today to enhance the expressivity of Gray's elegy through an appeal to both the eyes and the ears of listeners.