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Enargeia: Visions in Performance

Enargeia (Greek *εναργεια*, in Latin *evidentia*, in 17th-century English *visions*¹) is one of many artistic and performance concepts taken into 17th-century aesthetics from Classical Antiquity. It is of fundamental importance in the performing arts, but there has so far been almost no attempt to study its historical meaning in order to shape a modern approach to the practicalities of performance in Early Music and period drama.

As a literary device, *Enargeia* seeks to heighten emotional effect by intense, richly detailed visual description, so that the listener sees what is described, as if it is there, before his own eyes. Perhaps the best-known examples are Shakespeare's detailed descriptions of imagined scenes, performed on the bare stage of the Globe Theatre. Energetic writing is often introduced by the *cernas* (you see) formula - Behold! *Ecce!* *Siehe!* *Ecco!* - or by deictics - Here! There!

In music, *Enargeia* is realised by composers 'painting the words' with high notes for *paradiso*, low notes for *inferno* etc. Such 'madrigalism' is scorned by modern musicologists, but was fundamental to the period Art of composition: it is far more effective in performance, than on the page, especially when coupled to historical Action and baroque Gesture. According to *Il Corago*, *Enargeia* is also expressed by the changing tone-colours of the singer or speaker, a subtlety difficult to acquire and easily lost unless vocalising prioritises transmission of the text over beauty of sound, constant vibrato, or maximum volume.

Enargeia presents emotions as if in passionate story-telling, reminding us of the importance of narration and messenger-scenes in early opera, and of the original designation of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* as *favola in musica*: a Story in Music. 17th-century libretti often link visual details of the imagined scene to actual sights close by the theatre, helping the audience make the visionary connection between art and reality.

Enargeia is central to the period theory of emotional communication. Visions are created in the audience's minds by poetic imagery in the sung/spoken text, by watching an embodied performance, and by the visual spectacle of stage set and action. Meanwhile, music creates emotional sound-effects that underline those same Visions, articulating changes from one Vision to another. It is these fleeting Visions in the minds of performers and audience alike that inspire changes in the balance of the Four Humours, producing the physical signs and feelings of emotion.

This investigation of *Enargeia* follows on from the previous project of *Text, Rhythm, Action!* in which we studied the performance priorities of the period, priorities which differ sharply from those of today's early music practitioners. That study redefined the practical processes of performance and revealed the fundamental importance of Visions. This next investigation of *Enargeia* looks beyond the act of performance itself to examine pre-performance processes of libretto-writing and musical composition (processes which in this repertoire are nevertheless shared with improvising performers), real-time synthesis of vision and performance, and post-performance outcomes, the effect of enargetic Visions on audiences.

Significant themes that have already emerged are Mindfulness – the need for performers to remain 'in the moment', synchronising their reception of Visions from the Text with their projection of those Visions in Action, that synchronisation controlled by musical Rhythm – and Detail. According to the Rhetorical requirement for Decorum, attention to detail and coherence of small detail with the 'big picture' are vital.

This suggests a contrast between Romantic 'artistry' and Early Modern 'Good Delivery'. In earlier repertoires new Art is created by passionate attention to small detail, rather than by a blinding flash of 'genius' or by some invented, foreign concept, applied with a broad brush. Thus Leonardo da Vinci enargetically uses highly detailed observation and scientific investigation to produce utterly new concepts (e.g. helicopters) as well as emotionally powerful art (the Mona Lisa).

Many period texts confuse – albeit productively – *Enargeia* (vivid description) with *energia*, the lively Spirit of passion, an animated energy that is transmitted especially from the performer's eyes. Both *energia* and *Enargeia* associate passion in musical performance with inspirational vision.

As with TRA, E-VIP is expected to reveal new insights not so much from the discovery of hitherto unknown source-material, but rather by close reading of known sources within the new contexts established by TRA and other recent research, and by the thorough and uncompromising application of period philosophy to the practical necessities of rehearsal and performance, and by reflective analysis of the results.

Our vision is to extend the concept of Historically Informed Performance beyond period instruments, techniques and performance styles, to encompass also the emotional framework within which the act of performance takes place, and within which the audience receive that performance.

In today's Early Music, a musician might well play baroque violin with period technique and style, but within a 19th-century framework of emotional performance, in which the audience is expected to admire the performer's 'emotionality' and 'expressiveness'. *Enargeia* offers us a detailed view of a period framework within which a performer's emotions and their transmission are of less interest than the poet's Visions and their reception, i.e. the audience's emotional reactions. The question to audience members is not "How did the performer do?" but "How did it feel to you?"

Our approach will be to investigate the historical theory of *Enargeia*, in order to develop rehearsal methodologies, workshopped with students and tested in professional productions of early music-drama with live audiences. As we progress, the focus will gradually shift from experimental & educational projects to cutting-edge international-level professional productions of major repertoire in mainstream venues, a shift already accomplished in the context of TRA, with award-winning results at international levels.

¹ The 'enargetic' approach to the arts may be described as rhetoric of presence and display, or aesthetics of evidence and imagination. Visual imagination plays a major role in the concepts of effect in oratory, poetry, and drama of ... the Early Modern Age, above all in the works of William Shakespeare.

Heinrich F. Plett *Enargeia in Classical Antiquity and the Early Modern Age: The Aesthetics of Evidence* (Brill, Leiden 2012)