

## 1. A unique choreographic genre

“Coreodramma”, the early nineteenth-century choreographic genre formulated and created by Salvatore Viganò, epitomised the pantomimic trends in theatrical dancing, reaching heights that concluded a process of development started more than sixty years before by both Gasparo Angiolini and Jean Georges Noverre, namely the two “creators” of the “ballet d’action”. This new Italian dance form was structured on a well-balanced assimilation of mime into ballet and vice versa. Viganò rejected the principles of the “danse d’ école” or pure dancing, also known in those days as “dancing in the French style”, and favoured a type of expressive, rhythmic movement that corresponded more directly to the psychological nuances of the plot. The response of the pantomime gestures to the music, their integration within the danced action, the use of simultaneous choreographic images within the same scene to enhance the pathos of the performance, represented “the full and definitive realisation of the precepts of the ballet d’action”.<sup>1</sup>

Although it originated from theories that had been previously expounded, “coreodramma” constituted a unique genre that, in dance history, cannot be placed alongside any other type of choreographic composition. This uniqueness derived from the combination of several factors. Firstly, Viganò’s artistic skills found a fertile field of application in the dance activities at La Scala theatre in Milan, the most important theatre for ballet and opera. Secondly, the plots of some tragic “coreodrammas” were prompted by the enthusiastic rediscovery and the critical revaluation of Shakespeare’s drama, which took place in Italy at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Finally, the massive proportions of the productions echoed the fashionable “grandeur” that underscored both the Napoleon era and the years immediately after the 1815 congress in Vienna.

Viganò, nephew of the composer Luigi Boccherini, was a well-cultured man who strove towards the realisation of a project in which the art of dancing, the art of music and the art of painting were all involved to the same degree. One century before the theatre reform brought about by Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev and his collaborators, Viganò had reached the same conclusions, although on a different basis. The genre of “coreodramma” could not be reproduced by Viganò’s successors, being the product of a single mind and being inseparable from the artistic personality of its creator. After the death of the choreographer – although the term “choreographer” in its meaning of “creator of dance steps” does not fully describe the man’s artistic ability – the genre of “coreodramma” rapidly declined and disappeared. During the following years, both Viganò’s brother, Giulio, and the choreographer Pietro Hus attempted several times to keep the tradition alive by restaging some of the most significant works; these were unsuccessful, lacking the personal inspiration and the actual supervision of the author. Yet, “coreodramma” had lasted long enough to imprint on Italian ballet those characteristics that denoted, for more than one century, that other unique genre known as “ballo grande”.<sup>2</sup>

Viganò’s works changed the conception of theatre dancing. On the one hand, the large-scale productions required long periods of rehearsals, even entire months, a prerequisite that in the past had never been imagined. On the other, the

particular technique of rhythmic and expressive mime required dancers especially trained. Among them was Antonia, or Antonietta Pallerini, Viganò’s muse.

Although “coreodramma” is an isolated phenomenon within the history of Italian ballet, its influence was particularly relevant to the subsequent formulation of theories on dancing and, above all, on mime applied to theatrical dancing. Dance historians agree in affirming that his influence led to the creation and the codification – arbitrarily credited to Carlo Blasis – of what is generally known today as the Italian “ballet mime”, namely that set of conventional gestures used in the recitativo scenes of nineteenth-century ballets.

Yet, as it will be demonstrated, Viganò’s mime differed considerably from the codified idiom that is still to be seen in the some philological restagings of the classics, a factor that has often been overlooked by dance scholars. In order to provide supporting evidence to this theory, a historical and analytical exploration of both Viganò and his works is required.

## 2. A brief historical account of the life and career of Salvatore Viganò

Salvatore Viganò, born on 25 March 1769 in Naples, arrived at La Scala theatre in Milan at the height of his artistic maturity, when he had already gained an international reputation. Previously, he had worked in Spain, Venice and Vienna, where he had produced the ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*, premiered in 1801, in collaboration with Ludwig van Beethoven. Although this work had met with little success, it could be considered as the first example of Viganò’s choreographic composition containing the germs of a new form of theatrical dancing. Once the work was performed at La Scala, restaged and revisited and with a new score, it marked the beginning of what could be called “the era of coreodramma”.

Between 1811 and 1812, Viganò staged five “balli grandi” which did not impress the audience of La Scala. These productions belonged to the pre-Milanese period, in which Viganò was still experimenting the formulae that were used eventually to create a new choreographic genre. More in particular, the five “balli” reflected his experience as a dancer, when he had worked with choreographers such as Jean Dauberval, whose *La Fille Mal Gardée* Viganò had danced in Venice; the five works staged at La Scala, therefore, reproduced dramatic and choreographic canons which were too familiar to cause any particular reaction. The only composition that aroused some positive comments was *Il noce di Benevento* (1812). This “ballo”, which many dance scholars regard as the first example of “Romantic” ballet, was based on a rather unusual and extravagant theme for the time, with witches’ covens and apparitions of both monsters and demons as core components. The spectacular character of the performance and the deployment of a considerable number of dancers and extras were later to characterise the whole of Viganò’s production.

The first major work that Viganò “created” for La Scala was the totally revised version of *The Creatures of Prometheus*, this time entitled *Prometheus*, set to a new score, with music by various composers, including Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Joseph Haydn and Viganò himself. The revised work was premiered on 22 May 1813. Compared to the Viennese

production, the new *Prometheus* differed in many aspects. The plot had been rewritten and expanded, and the action, which in the Viennese production was rather basic, in the Milanese version involved a larger number of characters, both mythological and allegorical, such as the Four Virtues and the Nine Muses. A large-scale use of theatrical machinery also provided continuous spectacular effects. The “coreodramma” ended with an “apotheosis” in which some scholars have seen the precedent for the canonic conclusive “apotheosis” of the “ballo grande” of the last two decades of the century.<sup>3</sup> In a later run of performances of *Prometheus*, during the autumn season of the same year, Filippo Taglioni, father of the celebrated Romantic ballerina Marie, interpreted the role of Mars.<sup>4</sup>

Between 1812 and 1813, Viganò created five new works, *Samandria liberata*, *Il nuovo Pigmalione*, *Gli Ussiti*, *Il sindaco vigilante* and *Numa Pompilio*, none of which, according to contemporary chronicles,<sup>5</sup> was particularly successful. It was in 1817, that he created *Mirra*, derived from the tragedy by the Italian playwright Vittorio Alfieri. This “coreodramma”, premiered in June, was praised as a work of genius, as stated also by Stendhal.<sup>6</sup> In recording its success, Viganò’s biographer Carlo Ritorni used the term “coreotragedia”, thus implying a distinction from “coreodramma”, which, supposedly, did not usually have a tragic connotation.

*Mirra* was followed by two other creations, *Psammi*, a “coreodramma” based on an Egyptian plot, and *Dedalus*, another successful work that won great critical acclaim. Among the three works composed by Viganò during 1818, two must be considered as the most significant products of the ballet-master’s creativity. These are *Otello*, based on Shakespeare’s tragedy, and *La Vestale*, derived from Spontini’s contemporary opera. The third “coreodramma”, *La spada di Kenneth*, set in Scotland, was another precursor of the Romantic ballet, for it contained fantastic elements drawn from folklore and legends.

The inevitable comparison between the choreographic version of *Otello* and the written drama did not preoccupy Viganò. The ballet-master set the entire plot in Venice and managed to render the most difficult moments of the story with great success. The dialogue between Jago and Othello, “received every night an enthusiastic outburst of applause”.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, *La Vestale*, was an adaptation of a well-known opera of the period, although, at the time the “coreodramma” was premiered, the opera had not been yet performed at La Scala, where it was staged only seven years later.

The year 1819 was marked by the realisation of Viganò’s most ambitious and, arguably, most acclaimed project, the “coreodramma” *I Titani*. The inspiration for the subject matter was drawn from ancient mythology, elaborated for the occasion with more than poetic licence, in order to suit the project; a mixture of pagan rites and biblical tales formed the story line. According to the libretto, the action began with an Arcadian scene, portraying the “golden age” of man’s history; such harmony was suddenly disturbed by the appearance of the Titans who, joined by the Cyclops, brought “terror and despair” and gave the mortals three vases containing all the vices and the bad qualities characteristic of humans.<sup>8</sup> As the world seemed to be in chaos and taken over by the Titans, Jupiter appeared from above and buried them under “falling mountains”. *I Titani*, represented the last acclaimed outcome of Viganò’s genius. Between 1819 and 1821, the year of his

death, he produced other “coreodrammas”, but none achieved the success of *Prometeo*, *Mirra*, *Otello*, *La Vestale* and *I Titani*. Only *Didone*, performed posthumously on 22 September 1821, was received with respectful deference to the memory of the ballet-master.

### 3. The source material on Viganò: a problem of documentation.

Although many ballet history manuals include either a chapter or a paragraph on Viganò and dance scholars agree in considering his work as a milestone in the evolution of “classical” ballet, the number of more specific and well-researched sources concerning the great ballet-master is limited to two. Neither can be considered satisfactory, since they are not primary ones. The first, entitled *Commentarii della vita e delle opere di Salvatore Viganò e della coreografia e de’ corepei scritti da Carlo Ritorni, reggiano*, is a collection of detailed records of Viganò’s theatre works, written by Carlo Ritorni, a fond admirer of the ballet-master.<sup>9</sup> The publication is not a reliable source mainly because of the oversympathetic attitude of the author towards the creator of “coreodramma”. In addition, as Carlo Ritorni did not have much competence in theatrical dancing, his records are limited to detailed descriptions of the plots, with no indication about the technical layout of the “coreodramma”.

The collected papers of a conference on Viganò held in 1984 at the Teatro Romolo Valli in the Italian town of Reggio Emilia, and published in that year under the title *Il sogno del coreodramma: Salvatore Viganò poeta muto* constitute the second, more recent source.<sup>10</sup> These papers provide a rich contextualisation of the subject, analysing all the cultural and artistic aspects related to “coreodramma”, considered within the musical theatre culture of its time. Unfortunately, as none of the lecturers was specifically involved in dance or ballet, the papers lack an analytical evaluation of this essential element. The research is also characterised by repeated references to Ritorni’s book, since other source material on Viganò is scarce. The collected papers, nonetheless, provide an interesting contribution to the analysis of a long ignored topic of dance history.

Salvatore Viganò did not leave any written work concerning his ideas on the structure and the techniques of “coreodramma”. According to Vincenzo Buonsignori, towards the end of his life Viganò wanted to write a book on rhythmic mime, the same he had used in his works. Buonsignori reports that, although the book was unfinished and unpublished, Viganò left a manuscript where some of the precepts were codified. Unfortunately, Buonsignori is the only author reporting on the existence of the manuscript,<sup>11</sup> for there is no evidence of it in the books and in the newspapers of the time, or in the archives of the museum annexed to the theatre La Scala in Milan. Yet, in his study on dance activities of that theatre between 1778 and 1970, the Italian scholar Luigi Rossi reports that Viganò attempted the codification of his own system of dance notation.<sup>12</sup> Although Rossi, not unlike Buonsignori, does not support his assertion with any evidence, it could be that he refers to Buonsignori’s passage, misinterpreting it.

Other examples of source material on Viganò are scenarios and programmes of the various “coreodrammas”; the sketches for the settings by Alessandro Sanquirico, Viganò’s favourite set-designer; and several literary descriptions of the

“coreodrammas”, including a critical commentary and a detailed description of some scenes in Stendhal’s *Journal d’Italie*.<sup>13</sup> None of these sources, however, provides additional information to Ritorni’s book.

#### 4. An analysis of some characteristic components of “coreodramma”

The lack of a treatise or a more detailed technical source on “coreodramma” obliges the scholar to analyse Viganò’s theatrical works through the records of Carlo Ritorni. Although the *Commentarii* are imbued with subjective and biased attitudes towards the subject, it is still possible to identify a few distinctive elements. For instance, a comparative reading of Carlo Ritorni’s descriptions of Viganò’s creations reveals some recurring elements of the “coreodramma” that can thus be considered as the fundamentals of that form of theatre dance. The first element to draw the attention of the scholar is the ballet-master’s rejection of a written “introduction” to his works. As he affirmed,

I believe it is necessary to warn the admirers of my works that, given the difficulty of explaining by gestures [concepts related to] the past and the present, I always try to structure my own works so that the viewer does not need any knowledge of either the past or of the future events to understand the content of the picture I draw. It is, therefore, useless to have an introduction to my works, such as this one [*La Vestale*]. As the plot gradually develops on the stage, and the human relationships as well as the inherent feelings are all clearly conveyed, everyone can see and understand everything, without studying or referring to programmes or written explanations.<sup>14</sup>

More than forty years after the “querelle” between Gasparo Angiolini and Jean Georges Noverre, Viganò solved the controversy about the use of a written programme to explain the mimed action. His solution consisted in choosing subjects and plots that, in his opinion, were “complete” and, therefore, did not need any introduction or written explanation. According to Viganò, every moment of the action ought to be performed on stage, in order to avoid complex references to facts and events that happened somewhere else; even the relationships between the various characters and their psychological nuances were clearly rendered by mime movements. The brief passage indicates that, in Viganò’s opinion, everything could be expressed through gesture, in contrast with Angiolini’s theories about the limitations of the language of gesture.

The second element of interest in Viganò’s works is that the structure of the dramatic and danced action of his major works, such as *Mirra*, *Otello* or *La Vestale*, was the same, representing a constant in his productions; this structure accommodated several sections or variants, which could be added or removed with a great deal of interchangeability, without affecting the original formula. These sections, always identical, were:

- a) “choral” scenes of both danced and mimed nature entrusted entirely to the “corps de ballet” in the first act.
- b) Mime acting interwoven with a small amount of dancing in the “French style” in the second act.
- c) The so-called “tragic pantomime” in the form of a monologue, a dialogue or a finale to be performed by the soloist with the “corps de ballet”, in the third act.

- d) Mimed scenes alternately assigned to soloists and to the “ensemble”, in the last one or two acts.

The inclusion of choral scenes (a) reveals how, following a well-rooted tradition within the performing arts, Viganò aimed to surprise the audience at the beginning of his “coreodrammas”. To entrust the first act to the “masse”,<sup>15</sup> deploying from the beginning the full company inclusive of the “corps de ballet” and extras, produced an effect of grandeur. An example can be found in the opening tableau of *La Vestale*:

At first a vast setting is revealed...The stairs and the galleries [of the arena] are crowded with Consuls, Senators, all the Roman aristocracy and the people watching the fight...The charioteers come forward, turning several times around the circus.<sup>16</sup>

The presence of the full company on the stage also allowed the ballet-master to create choral dances, which were usually derived from folklore, as in the case of *Otello* where there was performed a “Furlana”, a dance from the north-eastern regions of Italy.

The combination of mime acting with dancing in the “French style” (b) is particularly interesting. The second act of Viganò’s “coreodrammas” started and ended with a mimed scene. In between there was the “balladue alla francese” or “dance for two in the French style”. This is the only exception to Viganò’s continuity of style. The “balladue”, ancestor of the “pas de deux”, was the only moment of the “coreodramma” in which French “technical” or “mechanical” dancing took place. The reasons for such discrepancy in the stylistic structure of the “coreodramma” can be found in the taste of the public and their need for “entertainment”. The “balladue” was generally introduced by a contextual pretext such as the celebration of a victory or a banquet.

The last two elements of “coreodramma” listed above (c and d) indicate one of the most characteristic components of that art form, namely the mimed action entrusted to principals and soloists. Viganò had traced a neat distinction between different genres of mimed action. One was “pictorial” mime or the one used to confer a sense of continuous and differentiated activity on the actions performed by the “corps de ballet”. The other was the so-called “tragic” pantomime, which had a less decorative function, being the means of expression of soloists and principals who conveyed their character’s feelings and emotions through it.

In the papers of the congress on Viganò, Professor Fabrizio Frasnedi stresses the difficulty that a contemporary scholar might come across in trying to understand the technical nature of the two forms of mime.<sup>17</sup> He asserts, in fact, that the pantomime of the “corps de ballet”, in the form of gestures rhythmically performed in accordance with the music and with the action of the soloists, survived as an art on its own in what is generally referred to as “comic” or “grotesque” mime – an example of which is that of Marcel Marceau. In contrast, the other range of gestures, the “tragic” mime, disappeared, being exclusive to Viganò’s art. Such an assertion sounds too hazardous, especially if the theories formulated by Angiolini and his contemporaries are taken into account. In Angiolini’s works, as well as in those of Noverre, the dancers who were supposed to portray noble or “tragic” characters were advised to look upon masterworks of the visual arts, in order to find a source of inspiration for their gestures. Examples of these “statuary” poses and “hieratic” movements can be found in the

illustrations that enriched publications on the art of mime such as Johann Jacob Engel's *Ideen zur einer Mimik*.<sup>18</sup> One might suppose that Viganò followed the rules stemming from the "ballet d'action" with which he had been trained; "tragic" mime, therefore, was not something he had created for the "coreodramma", and although it gradually disappeared during the nineteenth century, it is still well documented.

Professor Frasnedi's assertion on the survival of the mime of the "corps de ballet" in that defined today as "comic" or "grotesque" is not entirely satisfactory either. The mime Viganò used for the "masse" had to be clear and intelligible, derived from common habits and from a popular gestural tradition. This type of expressive movements stemmed supposedly either from folklore and dialect culture on the one hand, or from the language of gesture belonging to the *Commedia Dell'Arte*, on the other. In both cases, it survived as an integral part of the nineteenth-century ballet tradition, distinct from the so-called "comic" or "grotesque" mime.

An interesting element that seems to have been frequently overlooked in dance history manuals, and even in the papers of the 1984 conference, concerns the mime monologues and duets referred above (c). As it has been mentioned already, since the reform of ballet started in the eighteenth century, one of the major concerns of both dance theorists and ballet-masters was to find appropriate and intelligible ways of rendering abstract concepts through mime. In order to circumvent the difficulty of such representation, different factions of reformers proposed different solutions. Some of these theorists suggested simply to avoid the choice of an argument or of a plot that might create confusion in the audience. As mentioned above, Gasparo Angiolini shared this opinion in stressing the simplicity of the narrative action as an essential component of his choreographic compositions. In contrast, Noverre proposed the introduction of written programmes explaining the content of the mimed action. In both cases, the limits of sign languages were acknowledged. Authors dealing with the mime matter, but not involved with ballet, suggested the use of "compound" movements that could express several meanings. This device, however, did not provide a suitable solution to the problem. In various treatises, as in those by Carlo Blasis, one can find a discussion of this argument. Ideas and concepts that related to the past or the future, or to something that happened off-stage and therefore had to be reported, always aroused the scepticism of authors dealing with mime.

For these reasons, Ritorni's frequent mention of entire monologues or dialogues performed only through the language of gesture cannot be ignored. Unfortunately the description of these events is limited to the narration of the content, avoiding the depiction of the means used. Each passage, however, reveals how the range of feelings and emotions that had to be conveyed by the principal dancers in a Viganò's work went far beyond the basic vocabulary of gesture codified up to that time. It is possible that Viganò managed to extend the vocabulary of theatre gesture, by adding expressive movements that were subsequently lost. It is also possible that the personal skills of the interpreters played a decisive part in conveying the various scenes.

Another striking element resulting from Ritorni's account is that, with the exception of a few common actions, the various mime monologues and dialogues were mainly based on a display of the psychological reactions experienced

within that particular scene by the characters. The ballet-master and the interpreter had supposedly created specific movements to depict each nuance of passion or emotion and, what is more important, had managed to render those movements intelligible to the audience. The immense popularity of works such as *La Vestale*, in fact, demonstrates that the public did not find any difficulty in understanding and penetrating the content of the dramatic action.

The fact that the "tragic" mime consisted mainly of both "hieratic" and "statuary" movements, seems to indicate that Viganò's choices reflected the principles derived from the previous century, when artistic canons were moulded on the examples of both ancient Greece or Rome. It seems, therefore, that Viganò did not belong to the Romantic movement, although he did not share the ideas of the supporters of the Italian "Classicismo" – the art movement that stemmed from the Italian Enlightenment – either. From this perspective, both the inventor of "coreodramma" and his creations constitute an interesting case. Viganò and his work belong to a moment of cultural and artistic transition when the various arts were slowly shifting from the "Classicismo" mode towards the Romantic canons. "Coreodramma" should therefore be considered as a Pre-Romantic form of theatrical dancing. Yet, the term "Pre-Romantic", in dance history, refers to the epoch of the "ballet d'action", in which "coreodramma" is arguably included.<sup>19</sup> Although both forms relied considerably on mime, there was a neat difference between "coreodramma" and "ballet d'action". Unlike the creators and the supporters of the latter, Viganò did not want to pursue the dream of a resorted art of pantomime, in the fashion of ancient Greek theatre. His "coreodrammas" were meant to be a new form of theatre, independent of historical models. The purpose of "coreodramma", according to its creator, was mainly to confer a sound artistic meaning to danced performances, differently from the superficially spectacular formulae of the "French dancing". In Viganò's opinion, as revealed also by the various examples of "silent" monologues to be found in creations such as *La Vestale* or *Otello*, there were no limits to the expression of concepts through gestures.

"Coreodramma" inaugurated a new style, soon to be defined by its contemporaries as "dancing in the Italian style" or rhythmical miming, in contrast with the "French dancing", or technical dancing, that Viganò maintained for entertainment's sake. To preserve pure dancing created some discrepancies as well as a remarkable discontinuity of style as indicated above. The inventor of "coreodramma", however, had to make some concessions to the taste of the audience, for French or "mechanical" dancing was very much in favour, and eventually regained its absolute primacy once Viganò's season was over. The supremacy of mimed action over "mechanical" dancing reversed the canons of theatrical dancing as a performing art. Acclaimed and praised by some of his most cultured contemporaries, such as the composer Gioacchino Rossini or the poet and novelist Stendhal, Viganò also received a considerable amount of criticism. The traditionalists of the time accused him of creating only "pantomimes" and regarded him as responsible for the estrangement of "French" or virtuoso dancers from La Scala. The ballet-master never answered these accusations. His supporters, on the contrary, replied that

Those asserting that in his [Viganò's] ballets there is no dance are liars... He [Viganò, as his defence] mentions

the “furlana” in *Otello*, the Egyptian “ballabile” in *Psammi*, the Sicilian dance in *Bianca*, the ritual dance of the vestals in the first act of that ballo [*La Vestale*] and in *I Titani* almost the whole of the first act. He [Viganò] says that in all his “balli” there is dancing from the beginning to the end, as his [Viganò’s] is a danced pantomime, and not a “walked” one in the French style.<sup>20</sup>

Viganò’s defence, written in the colloquial style which was characteristic of the journalistic writing of the period, focuses on an important element. There is clear distinction between pantomime as conceived by Viganò and French pantomime. The latter is said to be “walked” and not “danced”. This differentiation is essential in order to understand the Italian mime in ballet. French mime, after the performance of *Les Horaces* at the reception of the Duchesse du Maine in 1714 – considered as the first step towards the rediscovery of a theatrical language of gesture – evolved towards different forms of theatre, such as the “monodrama” that represented a distinct genre from the “ballet d’action”. Soon the art of mime acquired its character as an independent form of performing art, which did not need a particular context, such as opera or ballet, to have its own “raison d’être”. From the first decade of the nineteenth century, “pantomime” constituted one of the most fashionable forms of entertainment in France, an example of which may be found in the film *Les enfants du paradis*.<sup>21</sup> Mime acting in Italy, on the contrary, never became an independent form of theatre, and remained linked to other forms of performing arts, such as opera, ballet or drama.

In order to suit different contexts, mime actions had to follow the well-defined rules of the various artistic genres. Theorists such as Vincenzo Requeno distinguished in their works the different types of mime that related to each for of theatre.<sup>22</sup> For these reasons, mime in Italy was conceived only in relation either to the words or the music. In the latter case, expressive gestures were adapted to musical measures in order not to create any discrepancy with the rest of the action whether sung or danced. Considered from this perspective, Italian mime was “danced”, to use the words of Viganò’s supporters, for it followed notes and phrases of the music in the same way as the ballet steps, in contrast with the “walked” and independent French mime. It is interesting that, in 1828, Carlo Blasis criticised French mime for not being suitable for ballet:

In Italy people are naturally inclined to Pantomimes, and the mimes already make use of gestures of convention. In France, some length of time and a course of deep study would be required to attain the same degree of perfection. The French Pantomimes have adopted only a small number of gestures, of which the greater part is destitute of correct expression.<sup>23</sup>

The criticism, which might have been prompted by the short experience Blasis had as a dancer in Viganò’s “coreodrammas”, is interesting if the dance training Blasis had received is taken into consideration. The celebrated ballet-master, in fact, had become a dancer under the guidance of several French teachers, representatives of that style that Viganò did not favour and was always billed as a “French dancer” himself. In addition, even the few mime roles that Blasis danced before going to Italy were based on the mime principles stemming from the French tradition. Although he never shared Viganò’s opinion on rhythmic mime and on its supremacy over techni-

cal dancing, it is possible that, by the time he was writing the *Code of Terpsichore*, Blasis had become aware of a new dimension in the use of expressive gesture in the Italian style.

## 5. Viganò, Blasis and the codification of the Italian ballet mime

Through the works of masters such as Viganò and Blasis, between 1813 and 1830, pantomime reaches its highest degree of artistic dignity. Blasis, through his experience with Viganò and, most of all, through the inspired teachings, arrived at the theoretical and practical definition of this art [pantomime], bestowing upon it technique and aesthetics whose harmony triumphed throughout the century, thanks to the great virtuoso dancers from La Scala school.<sup>24</sup>

This assertion reflects the attitude that several dance historians share and have shared towards Viganò. The Neapolitan ballet-master is usually regarded as the person who conferred a particular high standard and cultural status on the art of mime in Italian ballet. Although this argument is not disputed, it is the formulation of the thesis that appears to be misleading. Viganò did not create or “invent” a form of theatrical mime, and more particularly, he did not create a vocabulary based on conventional gesture similar to the one still currently used within the nineteenth-century ballets. Although the only sources providing evidence are Ritorni’s chronicles, it can be seen that Viganò’s mime was not based on a fixed idiom of conventional signs. In this respect, it differed from French mime that, apart from being “walked”, was, already at the beginning of the nineteenth century, very stylised.

The few contemporary critical sources that exist stress the fact that Viganò supported the use of a “natural” mime language, which could not have fixed schemes, rules or principles. In order to be “natural” the movements derived from the interpretation of the dancers. This is demonstrated by Ritorni’s records and by the fact that Viganò had to train dancers especially. In affirming that Viganò “conferred on pantomime the highest degree of dignity”, Gino Tani and other historians who share the same opinion, seem to imply that, through “coreodramma”, the art of mime in ballet received its definitive regulation which, in fact, was achieved much later.

Tani’s assertion, moreover, draws attention to another point: that is placing Blasis alongside Viganò, as if the two ballet-masters could represent two complementary sections in the same chapter of dance history. Curiously this seems to be a general problem, for there are other scholars who tend to link the two names. Still there are several differences between the two men. The factor that confused many dance scholars is that they both contributed to the reassessment of mime gestures within theatrical dancing, although in completely different ways. The only link between Viganò and Blasis arises from Blasis’ career as a dancer at La Scala while the former was resident choreographer. Still, the author of the *Code of Terpsichore* never mentioned or referred to Viganò in any of his treatises, a factor that might hint at substantial differences of opinion between the two celebrated ballet-masters.

Because of the arbitrary and superficial historical equation that links Viganò to Blasis, both the art and the creative genius of the former have suffered considerably from a biased posthumous reputation. What has been said so far reveals that, between the two ballet-masters, Viganò was the real innova-

tor who, like George Balanchine, created a unique and unrepeatable choreographic genre deriving it from a radical rethinking of pre-existing formulae. Blasis, on the contrary, codified dance and mime principles that, at the time of their publication, were hardly innovative. His only merit, therefore, is to have collated, organised and arranged systematically all those principles in a way that had never been approached before; but he did not “create” anything, nor did he contribute to the development of the choreographic art. Still, the success of his printed works and the way he reintroduced “French dancing” into Italian ballet – the story he created the so-called Italian school is, in fact, pure legend<sup>25</sup> - made his fame obscure that of Viganò, namely the one who had created an Italian national choreographic style.

Further research is needed to appreciate Viganò’s art more in depth, even though the memory of his works might be lost forever. After all he inspired artists from many different fields as the curious similarity between his *Otello* and Giuseppe Verdi’s later opera – which begins with the same storm scene as did the “coreodramma”- seem to demonstrate.

### Notes

- 1 Tani, G. (1950) ‘Il Dramma pantomimico o balletto d’azione’, in D’Amico, S., ed., *Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo*, Roma: Le Maschere
- 2 Literally “great ballet”, although there is a difference between “ballet” – a term used mainly to refer to choreographic works imported from abroad and, more in particular, from France – and the Italian “ballo” – which in most scenarios of the time indicated a national product. The term “ballo grande” was coined in relation to the vast proportions of the works by Viganò. Some of the most exterior features of “coreodramma”, such as the spectacular nature of the works, remained a distinctive trait of the Italian choreographic production throughout the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century. The term “ballo grande”, therefore, designates a specific genre of theatre dance, which found its peak in the trilogy of ballets by Luigi Manzotti, namely *Excelsior* (1881), *Amor* (1886) and *Sport* (1896).
- 3 See Rossi, L. (1972) *Il ballo alla Scala*, Milano: Edizioni della Scala, p. 54

- 4 See Cambiasi, P. (1906) *La Scala 1778-1906*, Milano: Edizioni della Scala, 5th edition, p. 564
- 5 Cambiasi, op.cit. pp. 565-566
- 6 Stendhal, (1977) *Diarii*, Torino: Einaudi
- 7 Anonymous reviewer, quoted in Rossi, L., op.cit., p. 59
- 8 Ritorni, C. (1838) *Commentarii della vita e delle opere coreodrammatiche di Salvatore Viganò*, Milano: Guglielmini e Redaelli, p. 134
- 9 Ritorni, C., op. cit.
- 10 Raimondi, E. ed. (1984) *Il sogno del coreodramma. Salvatore Viganò poeta muto*, Imola: Il Mulino
- 11 Buonsignori, V. (1854) *Precetti sull’arte mimica*, Siena: Tipografia dell’Ancora, p. 19
- 12 Rossi, L., op. cit., p.64
- 13 Stendhal, *Journal d’Italie*, Paris: Calman-Levy, 1911
- 14 Viganò, S. in Ritorni, C. (1838), op.cit., pp. 198-199, translation by G. Poesio. This is the only section in the entire book written by Viganò himself.
- 15 Literally “masses”
- 16 Ritorni, C. (1838) op. cit., pp.199–200, translation by G. Poesio
- 17 Frasnedi, F. (1984) ‘ Il genio pantomimo’, in Raimondi, E, ed., op.cit.
- 18 Engel, J.J. and Rasori, G., translator (1820), *Lettere intorno alla Mimica, versione dal tedesco di Giovanni Rasori*, Milano: Batelli e Fanfani
- 19 See Winter, M.H. (1974) *The Pre-Romantic Ballet*, London: Pitman, pp. 1-6
- 20 Petracchi, A. (1818) *Analisi del ballo di Viganò intitolato Mirra*, Milano: Bettoni, unnumbered pages.
- 21 Carné, M. (1945) *Les Enfants du paradis*, based on a script of Jacques Prévert, Paris: S.N. Pathé Cinema
- 22 Requeno, V. (1797) *Scoperta della Chironomia*, Napoli
- 23 Blasis, C. (1828) *The Code of Terpsichore*, London: Bullock
- 24 Tani, G. (1983) *Storia della Danza*, Firenze: Olschki, vol.III, p. 1397, translation by G. Poesio
- 25 See Poesio, G. (1997) “Blasis, the Italian ballo and the male sylph” in Garafola, L. , ed. *Rethinking the Sylph*, Wesleyan University Press