



Artistic Development Research Project: "Expression and Performativity in 18th-Century Vocal Practice"

Summary

La Petite Bande developed, over its fifty-year history under the direction of Sigiswald Kuijken, a distinctive expertise in historically informed performance practice. Aspects such as the "chin-off" technique for baroque violin and the integration of Classical-period wind instruments found wide international dissemination through La Petite Bande.

Another aspect – scenic performativity with a historically informed approach – still awaits significant dissemination within the early music world.

This project addresses precisely that gap.

What has been achieved within La Petite Bande over the last decade in the field of musical declamation and scenic performativity grew from the work of Marie Kuijken, who over a period of thirty years developed her own vision and approach in this area. This practice forms the starting point of the current research project.

Under her artistic direction, La Petite Bande now wishes to conduct an in-depth artistic development research project into historically informed vocal performativity in 18th-century Italian and German repertoire.

The project proceeds from the conviction that the singer in opera, cantata and song is the central artistic subject – and that a historically informed performance practice that has not fully incorporated the singer as a scenic and declamatory subject remains fundamentally incomplete.

Through this research, the singer develops an inner compass: a guide to arriving independently at expressive choices, rooted in historical knowledge and in personal creativity. The singer's own artistic responsibility is thereby strengthened – a fundamental value within the world of historically informed performance practice.

The methodology of “Expressive 18th-century Acting”

The developed methodology can be understood as an integrated process in three interrelated phases: declamation, musical integration, and scenic incarnation. What follows is an elaboration of these phases as they have developed in practice.

The declamation phase – the foundation

The methodology of "Expressive 18th-Century Acting" that Marie Kuijken has developed over the past thirty years, within and beyond La Petite Bande, takes the libretto as its point of departure – as "music before the music".

The sung text is, after all, not prose! Even the act of restoring that text to its original poetic form – which from the score alone is not always straightforward – is in itself a fascinating action that is rarely asked of singers. In doing so, the door is opened to the very essence of content and expression.

The poetic form of the text – the expressive verse rhythm in which the poet cast the words before the composer set them to music – is deeply analysed. Every detail of the verses of the libretto (form, content, intentions, affects, interaction) is recognised in its poetic rhythm, and declaimed aloud in an expressively rhythmic manner through several stages, before the part is sung. This preparatory approach mirrors the practice of Goethe as theatre director in Weimar: he would sit with singers around a table to work on the text before musical and scenic rehearsals began.

Once this foundation has been fully internalised, and once singers have learned to make these expressive analyses themselves, they acquire a skill and an autonomy that will serve them throughout their entire career. This approach deepens their vision, intensifies their experience of the text, and substantially raises their expressivity – in opera, song, oratorio, any repertoire.

Everything discovered and activated in this phase forms the foundation upon which all subsequent work will rest. Here the libretto becomes habitable: layer by layer, the singer penetrates through sound, rhythm, meaning and affect, until the text has become a lived space.

The musical phase – a first harvest

During the musical rehearsals – that is, in the singing itself – everything discovered and activated up to this point is carried forward and applied. This is a crucial "harvest" phase: what was sown in the declamation phase comes into bloom here. It is precisely this aspect that is largely absent from the standard teaching of historical performance practice for singers: just as the bow differentiates direction and weight and the distinction between up- and down-bow carries rhetorical meaning, so the poetic verse calls for hierarchy in syllables and rhythmic accents in the vocal line.

The practice of the declamation phase also makes it possible to look, as it were, "over the composer's shoulder": in the light of all previous analysis, specific musical choices by the composer that no one previously noticed often suddenly become clear and meaningful, and find conscious practical application. In general, the singer becomes far more aware of the intrinsic bond between the text of the librettist and the music of the composer, which benefits the overall performance in important ways.

The scenic phase – incarnation from within

The next component is the scenic realisation, drawing on an acting style that is historically coherent: with postures, movements and gestures inspired by eighteenth-century customs and aesthetic principles, derived from historical sources (theatre treatises, etc.) and nourished by expressive impulses found in the visual arts. This eighteenth-century acting style is essentially a theatrical body language that, like a living language, can be relearned and practised.

This phase is not a new addition; there is no directorial concept imposed from outside – on the contrary, it is a further continuation of the same inner process already underway. The postures, movements and gestures, in correct historical style, grow coherently from the text and music that are now fully present within the singer.

Because this acting style is not detached from what preceded it but grows organically from it, the result is incarnation from within: a coherent unity of text, music and theatrical movement that is rarely pursued in mainstream operatic and musical practice, let alone achieved.

The extent to which a given production is fully scenic or semi-scenic naturally varies; yet this approach is also valuable in forms that are traditionally not scenic, such as song and oratorio. From the inner life of the text, a scenic intention arises, which the singer expresses through gaze, facial expression and minimal but expressive hand gestures.

Time and repeated practice are of course needed to anchor this body language and make it second nature. Only then can a singer employ it with spontaneity and creativity on stage, as eighteenth-century singers could. This path too is a process of maturation, leading to personal autonomy.

The singer can deploy this artistic autonomy in all productions where a historically informed style is pursued. Moreover, experience has shown that this approach also gives singers an expressive and communicative advantage in other productions, strengthening their artistic independence in those contexts as well.

The aim: a coherent whole

What Marie Kuijken calls "Expressive 18th-Century Acting" comes into being when all these layers have been thoroughly and creatively traversed in practice for a given work: for individual opera scenes, a complete cantata, a full opera, a song, an oratorio...

No layer replaces the previous one, and no layer stands apart from what preceded it. They are like the successive refinements of a single gesture – from inner movement to sound and to visible expression. The result is one organic whole, in which the singer does not perform but IS.

Structure and modalities of this development research

This research project falls under the function of Development as defined in the Arts Decree and invests in artistic research, methodology development and sector dissemination. Process and specific output are central. The project positions itself as a bridge between training and professional practice, and focuses on the development and transfer of a specific artistic methodology.

Research hypothesis

The methodology under investigation is already present and is put into practice within La Petite Bande, but requires further explication. Within this research, its various aspects are deepened and tested, in dialogue with the academic partner.

A specific focus is the role of the visual arts of the 17th and 18th centuries as a source of inspiration for expressive body language. The hypothesis is that these arts, as still-visible witnesses to the expressivity and aesthetics of their time, can deepen and enrich the process of developing and internalising theatrical body language, alongside the textual guidelines offered in historical treatises.

Singers as full research partners

Eight young professional singers (four sopranos/mezzo-sopranos, two tenors, two basses) participate as full research partners. They are selected through a process that culminates in an open audition day in September 2026. Selection criteria are voice type, vocal and artistic qualities, affinity with 18th-century repertoire and with this approach, their motivation for this research trajectory and for further integration of the methodology into their artistic career.

All participants – singers and artistic director – receive professional remuneration that recognises their commitment and expertise. The scale has been deliberately kept limited: intensively guiding eight singers over nine months yields more depth, more transferability and more lasting sector impact than a larger but more superficial trajectory. Quality of transmission, not quantity of participants, is the criterion here.

Workshops and remote mentoring

The artistic trajectory itself spans nine months (October 2026 – June 2027) and is built around four intensive five-day workshops. The periods between workshops serve the singers' own artistic integration and deepening, with assignments and remote mentoring, as well as the gathering and creation of material for the later output.

The workshops take place in the artistic director's own workspace. The model is deliberately not that of a rehearsal-to-premiere logic, but an atelier model that recognises artistic growth as a spiral process: deepening, maturation, return.

A broad repertoire of solo and duo scenes is covered, varying in composers and genres across the 18th century. The research focuses on Italian- and German-language repertoire – the central languages of the 18th-century operatic world, and the terrain on which the artistic director has developed her methodology. The aim is for singers to apply the methodology and work through its phases across this repertoire. Visual art from the 17th and 18th centuries is purposefully selected and assembled for the expression library.

Public phase: lecture-performances and open workshops

As the harvest phase of the trajectory, four thematically distinct public presentations take place in May 2027, in the form of lecture-performances in which the singers both explain and embody the methodology during performances of a selection of the musical scenes worked on during the research.

In the same month, workshops (open ateliers) are offered to conservatories and higher music institutions in Flanders and Brussels, with the research partners actively contributing to knowledge transfer and introductory coaching for the students present.

These presentations and workshops are offered free of charge, in keeping with the developmental character of the project: the aim is to test and disseminate knowledge.

Output and dissemination

In addition to the public phase in May 2027, the project also results in concrete, freely accessible material published on the La Petite Bande website, making the developed methodology transferable to the sector:

- A methodology guide (possibly printed in a limited edition)
- A libretto library: annotated libretto extracts with verse schemes, pronunciation guidelines and rhythmic analyses of the opera scenes worked on within the project, together with audio fragments of expressive declamation
- A video library with recordings of moments from working processes and public presentations
- An expression library of the visual arts: a digital collection of 17th- and 18th-century paintings and sculptures and their details, annotated with analyses of posture, gesture and expressive intention, including possible application within the repertoire worked on during the research
- An artistic research report with reflections from the research partners, compiled over the months of the research

This material will be edited during the summer months of 2027 and then made available via the La Petite Bande website. It is intended for singers, academics, conservatories and music schools, opera studios, directors, interested performers and ensemble directors who wish to explore this path. The publication of this material is important for the dissemination of this largely "missing component" of historical performance practice for singers.

After the research: thematic day

In the autumn, a La Petite Bande Day will take place at which the results of the research are presented to the public through lectures, panel discussions and musical performances.

Academic anchoring

KU Leuven is the formal partner of this project. The Letter of Intent was signed by Prof. dr. Priscilla Heynderickx, Campus Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and by dr. Benoît De Baere, Head of Academic Services, both of KU Leuven Campus Antwerp. From the Department of Musicology, Prof. dr. David Burn expressed interest in the project.

The collaboration is mutually motivated. For La Petite Bande, the academic partner anchors the research character of the project in a broader institutional context. For KU Leuven, the project offers the opportunity to follow at close range an artistic practice methodology developing outside the academic environment, but which has points of contact with research questions in musicology, theatre and art studies.

Concretely, KU Leuven makes venues available for the audition day (September 2026) and for the public presentations (May 2027), and facilitates exchange with students and researchers from the Faculty of Arts and the LUCA School of Arts. Further possibilities for collaboration will be explored jointly.

Previous collaborations, in which KU Leuven made its infrastructure available for rehearsal periods of La Petite Bande, have built a relationship of trust that underpins this collaboration both in terms of content and in practical terms.

Long-term ambitions

Just as the “chin-off” violin technique spread across the world in the 1970s–1980s through Sigiswald Kuijken and La Petite Bande and became the standard for historically informed string playing, the ambition of this project is to bring expression and performativity in 18th-century vocal practice to wider recognition in the world of early music. Not only through our own productions, but also through the research partners: the singers themselves, who internalise the methodology as their own practice and carry it forward – to colleagues, to ensembles, to the next generation.

In the longer term, this trajectory forms the artistic and methodological foundation for the further development of La Petite Bande. A concrete research horizon is the Haydn year 2032: an international moment that provides a platform for further research into and performance of Haydn's operatic repertoire within the framework of historically informed scenic expression. The first exploratory contacts have already been made.

Marie Kuijken, 18 March 2026

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