MUSIC THEATRE NOW – GLOBAL TENDENCIES AND PERSPECTIVES

By Prof. Dr. David Roesner

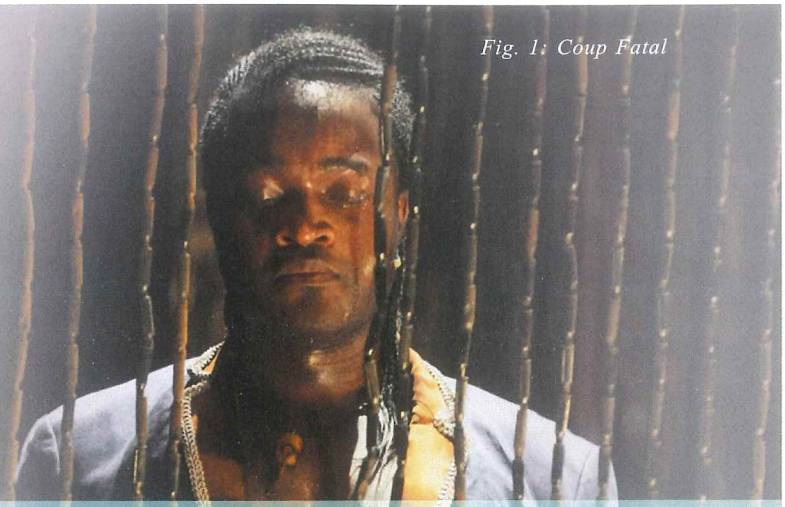


Fig. 1: Coup Fatal

We see a brightly lit stage with a band line-up spread out in the back, much like a concert stage for a dance or ballroom affair. Glittering curtains add to the visual effect, and the range of instruments promises an exotic flair for a Western European spectator, such as the Belgian audience of the first performance. The band plays, joyful exuberant Congolese music. Alain Platel, Fabrizio Cassol, Rodriguez Vangama and Serge Kakudji, who claim the collective artistic responsibility for this performance called Coup Fatal, have, however, embedded a few surprises and frictions into this seemingly innocuous setting. Suddenly, we find that the Congolese singer with cornrows is singing in a style that we can't reconcile at first with the framing and the accompaniment: he performs Baroque Handel arias with his countertenor voice; and the glittering curtains turn out to be stringed shell casings collected from Congolese war zones….

While the fourteen music theatre productions selected by the jury (out of 450 submissions from around the world) demonstrates a great amount of variety, stylistic breadth, and distinction in terms of their theatrical formats and musical idioms, there are a few characteristic threads, a few shared traits, which I will aim to unpack in the following text. The example above—while utterly unique amongst the award-winning productions—already highlights some of these tendencies, which fall into two mutually dependent and influential groupings: i) those concerning external aspects, such as performance venue, organisation, authorship and context; ii) those concerning intrinsic aspects, like narrative, musical material and idiom, thematic contents, and performance aesthetics.

1. FRAMES AND FORMATS / PERFORMERS AND AUDIENCES

In *Coup Fatal* we have a conventional stage setting, but the creators keep the performance deliberately suspended between established genres. It is part concert, part dance, and part music theatre. In Zoe Scoglio's *Shifting Ground*, spectators are invited into an intimate space with sofas, standard lamps and coffee tables. The event falls between an installation, a performance, video, and sound art. Furthermore for *The Source,* composer Ted Hearne and director Daniel Fish transform a conventional black box performance space into an auditorium without an actual stage. Audiences sit in the performance area in two large sections, facing each other with just a small gap separating the two first rows. Large video screens hang in the back and performers sing from the side. As we watch videos of people filmed while reading documents pertaining to the Iraq War—military document leaks by Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning—we ourselves watch each other watching these people. The performance is a palimpsest of acts of observation, acts of witnessing.

What these three performances have in common is that they all destabilize and interrogate our expectations and habits of attending music theatre performances. Christopher Small has described very aptly in his 1998 book *Musicking* how integral these frameworks and politics of theatre architecture, venue layout, ticket price politics, dress codes, social conventions, etc. are to the meaning-making process of what he calls, "musicking", the act of taking part, "in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing" (1998, 9).

How active audience often are in contemporary music theatre performances, and how radically they sometimes abandon the divide between auditorium and stage is particularly evident in *Invisible Cities*. In this piece, individual performances are spread out throughout Union Station in Los Angeles, and audiences are free to wander around, following individual performers (dancers, singers), while the score is assembled and mixed in their wireless headphones. Many sounds and spaces overlap and collide in this production, weaving a Foucauldian heterotopia (1971)—a layered space with unstable meanings. The performance, one could argue, does not actually exist without the audience's activity of exploring and experiencing it. And as the performance comes into existence, it includes the spectators as well as the unassuming commuters, who form an integral part of the piece's visual dynamics and emergent meaning. The performance follows rules that do not entirely pre-exist it, but which have to be created and negotiated in the act of performing and attending.

In its history and across many different cultures, music theatre has been a highly coded affair: a densely regulated cultural exchange with firm rules and expectations in terms of its spatial arrangements, genre conventions, time scales, and hierarchies in its creation as well as the specific liberties and restrictions for its audiences. Most of these codes have changed over time, at times impalpably, at others considerably, but it is generally a slow process. Even before we hear the first note, sound, or word, many of today's music theatre performances shed these conventions and redefine themselves or simply create performances that defy definition.

This process also challenges some of the core traditional roles, such as those of the director, composer, performer, and audience member. This may result in certain functions (libretto, composition, direction) merging in one person (like in *Salome* or *Xochicuicatl Cuecuechtli*)[1], or being shared equally by a collective (*Coup Fatal*). In terms of performance, instrumentalists may become theatrical personae (*Musicophilia*), singers may transform from characters into task performers, or musicians from other musical genres (singer/songwriting, jazz) become music theatre protagonists (*Slumberland, Wide Slumber*).

All this resonates strongly with a concept Matthias Rebstock and I developed a few years ago while trying to capture, describe, and analyse some of the very diverse music-theatrical phenomena, which are most strongly united by a shared impulse to interrogate and experiment with conventions, roles, and hierarchies, and which no longer limit the idea of "composing" to the score and the musical material. Here, composing can pertain to all areas of a performance, and becomes a key dramaturgical approach, rather than an accompaniment to an otherwise conventional narrative; an issue, to which I will come back later in this article.

In the discourse on "Composed Theatre" (which is the term we settled on, not as a "genre", but as a way of describing a field of practices), we discovered that creative teams are less driven by the imperative to "realise" a production based on a given story or commission, but seek out challenges to solve questions and to answer them through performance. Their works are investigations into the nature of how music, images, voice, body, sound, light, etc. interact and create experiences on stage.

Furthermore, composers and directors often deliberately challenge themselves, providing themselves with a key motivation for this kind of work. Heiner Goebbels, for example, explicitly states that he never stages a piece if he already knows how it will work: "I need to be surprised by it as well" (cit. in Roesner 2012, 342). What this means for creators and performers alike—and even this distinction is often blurred—is that they have to think and act "as other", stepping out of the comfortable shells of their training background and professional experience. Goebbels puts this succinctly by saying: "I make an advantage of both professions in order to get a distance. When I compose, I compose as director [...] and when I direct, I work as a composer" (ibid., 343). So not only does he act in different capacities in the process, he also relates them crosswise in order to provide different viewpoints, and to get rid of disciplinary habits.

On the whole, there is a clear sense that Composed Theatre requires a redefinition of the professional identities of those involved, or rather a move toward fluid definitions of their roles and tasks, since Composed Theatre does not merely replace one concept of a composer, performer, or director with another, but rather questions the idea and value of a stable artistic profile and job description.

It appears that the question of artistic identity has no single answer in Composed Theatre, but finds itself on a continuum: from a team of experts to a multi-role individual, from deliberately undermining performative "craftsmanship" to its highly virtuosic extension. The continuum is held together, however, by the shared conviction that the relatively clear and fixed assumptions about the roles of composers, directors, musicians, actors, dancers, technicians, designers, etc., which are expressed in the curricula of the relevant training institutions and the flagships of the creative industry must be interrogated in the process of making and performing Composed Theatre.

1. There are of course historical precedents for this, most notably Richard Wagner, but the separation of librettist, composer, and director is still the expected norm.

2. AUTHORSHIPS / MASH-UP / HYBRIDITY

The aforementioned *Coup Fatal* and *The Source*, as well as projects like *Comfort Ye* or *Il Ballo delle Ingrate* not only blur certain artistic roles, but also call the idea of "authorship" and "work" into question. Since at least the Romantic period, European artists and audiences alike have been strongly wedded to the idea of clearly identifiable authors of distinct works—this not only plays into the (continuing) desire for a romantic notion of the genius artist, but also helps with promotion, commercial exploit, and the legal aspects of intellectual property.

I was surprised about the degree of collage, adaptation, reimagining, sampling, mash-up and hybridity in many of the winning productions of Music Theatre NOW 2015: it would appear that the jury's sense of "innovation" reflects the forging of new connections—between Handel and Congolese or South African music, between pop music samples and a contemporary string ensemble, between Monteverdi and video installation, between contemporary opera and Hitchcock etc. Far from what I would—perhaps a bit boldly—call a Darmstadt-infused[2], post-Adornian snobbery with regard to compositional expectations, the demand for a rigorous development of compositional material (e.g., the spoken and unspoken restrictions for the use of tonality, of certain types of voice, rhythm, orchestration, etc.), many of the works presented at Music Theatre NOW 2015 are refreshingly unfazed by these sensibilities. They imaginatively mix the indigenous with the avant-garde, the popular with electronic noise, the operatic with folklore. This not only radically widens our notion of "wither music"[3] for music theatre in a post-avant-garde era, but also redefines the *dramatic* function of music in this context. Music is no longer primarily a means of setting dialogues and character utterances, no longer an orchestral running commentary and communicator of plot, subtext or thematic motifs, but very much one element amongst many following its own musical logic. More often than not, the music bears a *structural* relation to the overall staging, rather than a *narrative relation.*

Paradise Interrupted, for example, starts arrestingly with minutes in almost complete darkness with just a thin horizontal line of light, which seems to flicker somewhat, and a trembling score of high-pitched strings, traditional Chinese wind instruments like the *Sheng* and the *Dizi*, and tuned cymbals. It is a moment of pure (in a musical sense) vibrations of sound and light, creating a wide range of "impurities" (in a physical sense) of undulating sound waves and overtone frictions. It is theatre in the sense of John Cage, who said: "theatre is something which engages both the eye and the ear" (1965, 51), but it is a world away from a *dramatic sense* of music as we find it, for example, in Joseph Kerman's influential study *Opera as Drama* (1956).

But even those examples from the jury's selection that are presenting characters and plots often show signs of hybridity: Vladimir Rannev's *Two Acts* is a mash-up of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Goethe's Faust,* while *Pareyon's Xochicuicatl Cuecuechtli* adapts songs from the *Cantares Mexicanos,* a song collection in indigenous Aztec language Nahuatl "written in the 16th century after an older oral tradition" (see the production's programme notes) into a contemporary plot with some mythical twist of its own.

And finally, another type of hybrid becomes apparent, for example, in *Musicophilia* and *Wide Slumber*. In both cases there is an original libretto but it is highly interspersed with facts, images and citations from scientific literature: the neurological findings of Oliver Sacks and the work of Harvard University lepidopterists and UCL sleep researchers respectively. In both cases, strong links between the natural sciences and the search for new music-theatrical forms and languages are forged and making music theatre itself becomes a form of research as well as a means of making research accessible through an aesthetic experience[4].

3. APPARATUS: VOICES,INSTRUMENTS

Another area, in which the jury's selection deviates audibly from the operatic traditions at work in contemporary music theatre is the use of voice (see also Roesner, 2016). Heiner Goebbels has bemoaned a certain tendency in the European circuit to treat the voice indistinguishably from instruments. He identifies these as, "Compositional tactics, which have brought instrumental sounds that go far beyond the borders of conventional ways of making music", and criticises that these are, "'thoughtlessly' transferred to vocal (im-)possibilities of the human voice, without being aware of their scenic and theatrical meaning" (2015, 34).

This leads to characteristic "experimental vocal registers" (ibid.) such as "bold leaps, distortions, playing with phonemes, runaway melismas, the radical exploration of pitch and rhythm, vowels and consonants" (ibid.) resulting in "embarrassing, silly, ridiculous and hysterical acoustic grimaces, which fail to

2. After the Second World War, the biannual "International Summer Course for New Music" in Darmstadt, Germany, has been a particularly influential hub of concerts, premieres, lectures and workshops shaping the discourse on 'new music' in an often quite exclusive way. See also: Borio and Danuser 1997.

3. In his Harvard Lectures, published as The Unanswered Question (1976, 5), Leonard Bernstein posits this as the core question implicitly asked by composers such as Charles Ives during the transition and struggle between tonality and atonality in the early 20th century.

4. See Mersch 2015, Borgdorff 2006, and Nelson 2013 for a more detailed discussion of "practice as research" and aesthetic epistemology.

communicate any awareness of what they really imply" (ibid.). Most of the Music Theatre NOW productions sidestep this particular development of avant-garde vocality, but instead embrace a mixture of quite unique and individual voices on the one hand (such as those of the singer-songwriters in the Icelandic *Wide Slumber* and the *Belgian Slumberland,* which coincidentally share an interest in the phenomenon of sleep), and of quoting and playing with familiar vocal idioms from very different traditions on the other: we hear folkloristic voices (*Paradise Interrupted*), indigenous voices (*Xochicuicatl Cuecuechtli*; *Coup Fatal*), operatic voices (*Chachafaz; Private View*), baroque voices (*Coup Fatal*; *Invisible Cities*) musical theatre voices (*You Are My Loneliness; Comfort Ye*), spoken voices (*Musicophilia*), and electronically modified voices (*The Source*).

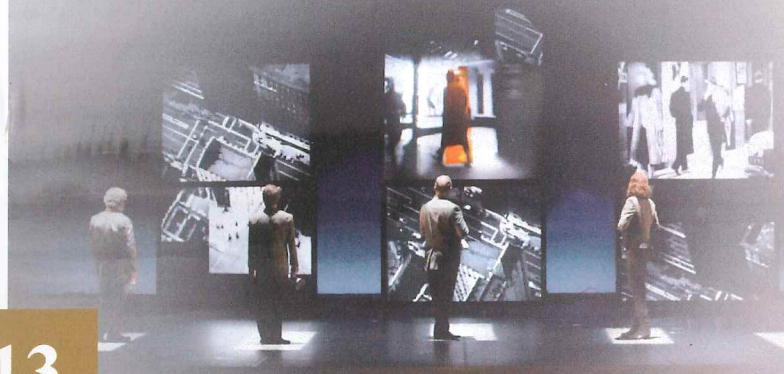


Fig. 2: Private View

We are confronted, then, with hybrid vocal aesthetics, including various degrees and techniques of training and various traces of personal or regional vocal inflections. The effect is a kind of "intervocality" (see Finter 2002)—by which I mean the quotation of, referring to, parodying, and intercutting of vocal idioms and specific audience expectations—often creates a theatrical friction and heightened presence, while also at times fashioning a deliberate critique of the commodification and commercialisation of "voice" in our times. Directly or indirectly, these performances thus thematise voice and its fetishized existence in many music-theatrical traditions. Voice is thus reflected as a highly coded entity, which is disciplined by technique, pigeonholed into vocal registers or "Stimmfächer", and met with obsessive expectations in terms of sound and virtuosic deliverance. Similar mould-breaking occurs with respect to the nature and the role of "the orchestra". The orchestra has abandoned the pit—which often doesn't even exist in the chosen and/or available venues—and varies greatly in terms of size, selection of instruments, and musical idiom. In many cases, however, the act of playing the instruments is itself of great theatrical interest and/or virtually inseparable from the scenic action. A performance such as *Shifting Ground*, for example, fuses materials, gestures and video images into an integrated whole. Other productions work with only one or two musicians, who also act as performers and render the distinction between orchestra and soloist obsolete. Rather than being a vehicle by which a story is told—as the original coinage of *dramma per musica* from the origins of music theatre also suggests—it would seem that the various forms and techniques of making music themselves are the spectacle.

4. NARRATION / SITUATION / ASSOCIATION

While narration is by no means abandoned by contemporary music theatre—judging by the 2015 selection—it is in many cases rendered problematic. This reflects a departure from the predominance of nineteenth-century plot tropes, which have continued to pervade twentieth century opera, a fact that music scholars have lamented frequently over the decades.

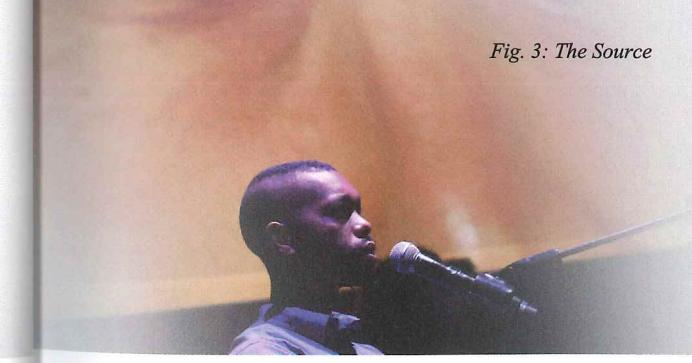
In 1962, Rolf Liebermann criticised his fellow composers for "dealing with yesterday's problems through tomorrow's language" (cit. in Honolka 1962, 206): "Modern opera flees the explosiveness of being contemporary and instead retires to the safe space of classical and romantic dramatic topoi and texts" (ibid.). Thirty years later, another composer, Gerd Kühr, offered a similar impression: "Independently of any thematic tendencies, composers still rely on literary sources to form the basis for their libretti" (1995, 199). And yet another decade later, musicologist and practitioner Nicholas Till writes somewhat more pointedly in his critique, "I don't mind if something's operatic, just as long it's not opera" (2004), that "a genuine critical modernism has barely been broached within opera. Even composers whose musical language may be radical invariably fall back upon a reified model of nineteenth-century dramaturgy, nineteenth-century models of plot, character, subjectivity, vocal expressivity, etc." (ibid., 17).

Many of the productions of Music Theatre NOW 2015 demonstrate a different approach: straight-forward stories are replaced with multi-layered narratives (*The Source, Private View*), literary or dramatic sources are deconstructed and fragmented (*Il Ballo delle Ingrate, Invisible Cities*), non-literary or even scientific texts are transformed into libretti of sorts (*Musicophilia Slumber, Lingua Imperii*) and many projects have adopted techniques of devising (see Heddon and Milling 2006) and collage (*Shifting Ground, Coup Fatal*), leading to *exploratory dramaturgies*. With this I mean the creation of theatrical situations rather than plots within which a rich web of images, sounds, gestures and texts are presented that spring from literal or metaphorical associations.

Not dissimilar to what Rebstock and I discovered in our analysis of Composed Theatre, this relative retreat from narrative/psychological dramaturgical models often leads to a strong sensibility for extending compositional thinking and compositional form to all aspects of the theatrical performance. This idea itself may not seem particularly new—we find it expressed in the writings of Richard Wagner or Adolphe Appia (see Rebstock 2012) and, very succinctly, in Arnold Schonberg's coinage "mit den Mitteln der Bühne musizieren" ("making music with the means of the stage") (1923 [1980], 131)—but contemporary practice has developed it significantly, both in terms of using it to develop alternative, non-narrative dramaturgies, to employ technology in imaginative ways of linking and translating theatrical media into compositional instruments, and to seek forms of abstraction that allow for (or demand) a different kind of audience engagement.

One could question, however, whether a musical notion of "composing" is applicable at all to non-auditory events. Can we really say that we are composing theatre as music or is it still, metaphorically, composing theatre as *if* it were music? The literal meaning, it seems, would ignore the "Eigengesetzlichkeit des Materials" (Adorno 1991: 158), that is, the unique (and differing) material qualities of theatre and music, as well as the unique (and differing) modes of reception of acoustically (music) and visually (theatre) dominant stimuli. The problem with this otherwise perfectly valid assertion lies in the assumption of a clear binary between the aural and visual, between music and theatre. Both are and always have been *composite* media, and many of their contributing aspects—such as language or sound—contain both acoustic and optical elements and appeal to both the listener and the viewer inseparably. I would thus argue that on a continuum of materiality stretching from musicality to theatricality, the notion of composition gradually shifts from its literal sense (composing theatre as music), via being a simile (composing theatre like music), to constituting a metaphor (composing theatre musically).

Fig. 3: The Source



5. POLYPHONY OF MEDIA

A final observation picks up on the previous point about compositional thinking as applied to theatrical media. At least for some of the productions in question, there was a distinct tendency I would call a "polyphony of media". Theatre makers use the musical idea and some key characteristics of polyphony—the independence and autonomy of each contributing voice in a piece written for several voices, as opposed to homophony, where all voices are subordinated rhythmically and harmonically to a single lead voice—
and extend and apply this idea to the theatre as a whole. This may apply particularly to the way in which these practitioners stage ensembles—of which Christoph Marthaler's theatre is a salient case. Marthaler's use of a choric ensemble of individuals combined with his dramaturgic techniques of collage (e.g., of texts, props, and musical references) and repetition grant each element its own autonomy and emphasis, allowing the audience's focus to wander not unlike the way our attention may oscillate between different voices of a polyphonic choir or string quartet.

Another vocal proponent of theatrical polyphony is Heiner Goebbels, who extends the musical process of fluid hierarchies in a counterpoint setting to virtually all constituent elements of the theatre, including lighting, sound design, and video. Goebbels reflects this approach more explicitly, however, in an attempt to elicit critical awareness, maturity, and self-determination in the audience. The strategies of challenging traditional hierarchies of production—to which Goebbels is committed in his collaborative devising processes as well as in his treatment of material(s)—are intended to spill over to the reception process:

> With flat hierarchies and non-alienated teamwork, in which the co-workers have the space, the time, and the freedom to develop their discipline further to give it weight, a polyphony of the elements can develop, which allows us to see a performance from different perspectives, a polyphony that opens up many access points, and enables audiences to individually synthesise their impressions from all the single impressions (Goebbels 2015, 80).

These principles of polyphony allow Marthaler, Goebbels, and others to offer their theatrical material in new ways that are less logocentric or character-driven.

In the Music Theatre NOW productions of 2015 we find similar strategies in place, particularly with regard to the use of media. I want to highlight *The Source, Slumberland* and *Private View* here. In the latter two cases, audiences are confronted with a simultaneity of screens, (split or superimposed) projections, and images, all of which are dramaturgically and aesthetically connected, yet reveal different perspectives, different "stories", and different associations. As in a polyphonic musical setting, it is impossible to truly watch and take in all of the competing visual "tracks". Instead the audience's minds are likely to sometimes shift quickly from one screen to the other while at other times taking in the whole as a densely interwoven visual and narrative structure. Subtle emphasis of certain elements—like the red coloration of individual—visual components in the otherwise black and white footage of Collective 33⅓ 's video work for *Private View*, may guide one's attention like a recurring motif in a piece of music.

Fig. 4: Paradise Interrupted

In *The Source*, polyphony exists in the interplay of visual and acoustic material, all of which is layered. On two large screens we see the faces of citizens, who—we are told—watch and read leaked documents from military operations of the Iraq War. The projected images are further interspersed or overlaid with textual extracts. The acoustic stage consists of a multiplicity of live and recorded voices, music, spoken text, sung text, and montaged samples of well-known clips from pop music repertoire , which often combine different idiomatic elements (elegiac strings with a nervous drum'n'bass beat etc.). In this way, the music-theatrical treatment as a whole exposes the impossibility—in contrast to the simplifying US government's statements at the time—of recounting the complexities of this war in a single, straight-forward narrative, but instead confronts us with a Bakhtian "heteroglossia" of voice[5]: a co-existence and simultaneity of autonomous voices of varied character and provenance. Many contemporary music theatre performances are indeed an "artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another" (Bakhtin 1981, 361) and form "a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships" (ibid., 263).

6. TECHNOLOGY

Contemporary music theatre is—judging by the 2015 selection—not just about exploring new interplays between text and music, music and gesture, tradition and innovation, but also, in many cases, about finding new and imaginative ways of using technology as an integral part of the production's fabric and aesthetic, rather than as a means to merely enhance and illustrate an otherwise traditional piece of music theatre.

Several productions have integrated a wide range of digital media, from sound and image production, via systems of transmission and amplification to software, which enables forging compositional connections between diverse elements such as gesture, voice, sound parameters and visual animation. *Paradise Interrupted*, for example, includes all these, but also integrates 'low-tech' stage technologies like the foldable stage design elements.

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My impression is that the experimental nature of these practices facilitates their makers ability to experiment and venture into new territories in the areas of science and technology. The continued development of soft– and hardware that allows for live manipulation of sound, lights, stage machinery, and the integration of a wide range of technical elements into one musically programmable and playable system, is particularly significant here.

This development is also connected to a previous point: the re-negotiation of roles and authorship. Interactive technologies allow for certain elements to remain open, to emerge anew in different shape or form in each performance. Authorship, here, does not mean to find and determine a final "work", but to create—often collaboratively—a system[6], which generates individual and unique performances night after night out of the interplay between performers, music, design elements, and interfaces such as trigger microphones, light sensors, and motion detection that is connected with sound and image editing/producing software.

5. Mikhail Bakhtin introduced this term in the 1930s for his analyses of the novels of Dostoevsky and Rabelais. See Bakhtin 1981.

6. With sociologist Bruno Latour, we could call these systems 'actor-networks', since, according to his theories, an 'actor network' consist in the totality of interactions of individuals, but also technologies. It maps both the material and semiotic relations between 'actants' and investigates how they form and constitute a whole (see Latour 2005). "ANT is a conceptual frame for exploring collective sociotechnical processes" (Ritzer 2004: 1).

7. A SUMMARY IN FOUR THESES

Given the significant overlaps between the given examples of new music theatre with characteristics of "Composed Theatre", which I outlined at the beginning, I have revisited, modified, and updated some of our findings on Composed Theatre in light of these new impressions and insights. These can be reduced to four theses:

1. Composed theatre, globally, is about specificity

There seems to be a trend, which is almost a counter-movement against certain operatic practices at the big opera flagships of this world. In New York, Paris, Berlin, Munich, Milan, and elsewhere, opera houses have become a carousel of big-name conductors, directors, and singers. Opera productions also frequently travel as a whole from a season at the MET to a season at the Bavarian State Oper, and so forth. Cast members are replaced, and revivals are often supervised by assistant directors. The system is thus built on productions that have a general appeal and largely replaceable components.

In most of the selected productions—and in most of the phenomena Rebstock and I have grouped under the heading of Composed Theatre—this could not be more different. Productions are developed and performed by a specific creative team, all of whose members enjoy significant collaborative input, and whose creative and personal biographies matter strongly. Performances are staged in specific relation to a location—a city, a venue, a community—responding to the given time and place, and integrating the context into the fabric of the performance. As these productions leave behind the established consensus and habits of the opera business with regard to canon to compositional "value", to craft, and to creative process, they develop singular ways of working, new dramaturgies, and new aesthetics of performance.

In brief, a utopia of specificity is articulated in these productions: the belief that no component is simply replaceable, but that all parameters of creation and performance enter a unique interplay, condition each other, and matter. The "work" is thus no longer mostly independent of its contributors, its conditions of coming into life, and its context of performance. *Vice versa*, the working *process* cannot be standardized, but needs to respond to the material and topic at hand.

I call this a utopia insofar as even the most innovative music theatre productions need to make financial, personal, spatial, and other compromises; yet the idea, the aim is one of specificity. In light of these ambitions, I would argue that these small-scale, independent, genre-defying music theatre—often devised outside of establishes institutional frameworks, are where we find innovation, boundary-crossing, and excitement, challenging our idea of what music theatre is.

2. Examples of Composed Theatre are aesthetically diverse, heterogeneous in terms of process, but often share a creative principle: the dissolution of fixed boundaries between acts of composing and staging

As the 2015 selection for Music Theatre NOW makes abundantly clear, there is a lot of variation and difference between the respective aesthetic surfaces, musical idioms, and the performance styles of all eighteen shows. They do not form a genre, a school or a style, which is probably unsurprising given their differences of provenance and working methods. Some processes are more collective, others more individual. Some rely more strongly on concepts, others on improvisation. Some are characterised by technology, others much less. Some are generously resourced, others are not.

What many of the productions seem to share, however, is a process behind the process: many of these diverse practices are united by an interest in deconstructing the fixed formulas of traditional music theatre (or also music theatre), instead integrating composition and staging into an often inseparable whole. A performance like Shifting Ground, for example, defies ideas of 'work', 'libretto', 'score' and will never be found in the catalogue of a music publisher or on a CD shelf. It shapes an audience's experience through visual, auditory and performative means, which are highly integrated and entirely ephemeral.

The compositional thinking present in many of these examples derives in a wide range of ways from music as an idea and as a practice: sometimes ontologically (reverting to certain fundamental musical parameters such as duration, volume, pitch or timbre), sometimes more historically (using and applying specific forms, techniques, and approaches from musical styles and genres, including polyphonic singing, instrumental counterpoint, jazz and rock). But in all cases, there is a conscious engagement with a particular kind of transference from music to theatrical performance and vice versa.

3. Composed Theatre requires a continuous reflection of the ontological conditions of music and theatre, including a profound questioning of these ontologies

Due to this intermedial and/or interartial[7] transference at the heart of many of the presented practices, I would argue that the practitioners involved continuously need to establish their understanding of both music and theatre as art forms, their strategies of communication, and their methods for shaping time and space. Their process of development—whether consciously or not—often means working not only on a new piece, but questioning the categories of "music" and "theatre" themselves. These then interrogate one another in their interplay.

This may require the acknowledgement of differences in the materiality of the art forms music and theatre, such as wavelengths of sound vs. light, or the pitched notes of sung text vs. the unpitched cadence of the spoken word. The composer Manos Tsangaris, for example, talks about the impossibility of simply "transposing" across different media—an increase in light is not simply a *crescendo* of light, he says (see Roesner 2012, 354). This did not prevent him, however, from challenging himself to compose a piece for only a conductor and lights (*Molto Molto,* 1980), which deals with these differences in materiality. Tsangaris describes his pieces as "phenomenological experiments": for him, they are research into modes of artistic perception, but also sociological research, since they are an "examination of the conditions of aesthetics" (ibid.). For his first piece for his teacher Mauricio Kagel, *o.T.* (1980), he centred all musicians around one person's (Kagel's) head. The main topic of the composition, says Tsangaris, was the question of how to stage music, of the significance of physical proxemics, and of the impact of placement of sound within a theatrical setting. It is music theatre about music theatre and it also is, consciously, a piece that could never become a repertoire piece given how uneconomical it is.

Other practices are concerned with the relationship of notation in performance, where this relationship is not (yet) as established and universally accepted as standard musical notation. There are transferences of linear structural relationships or vertical relationships of voices in the musical setting into the extended "instruments" of the theatrical elements, even though there are no simple analogies to the descriptive and normative rules of composition and arrangement. In the multimedial setting of theatre, there are no hidden parallel fifths one ought to avoid in spoken text, no deceptive cadences in gestures, no close harmony or bi-tonality in lighting—nonetheless, those practices that I would describe as Composed Theatre do employ a kind of thinking that seeks to create structure, meaning and effect in ways quite similar to music. They thus continuously deal with analogies and subtle medial differences, becoming highly aware of themselves and their related disciplines and genres.

Nicholas Till, for example, describes his and Kandis Cook's practice (i.e., "post-operative productions", see Till 2004) as a critical practice that seeks to investigate the use and function of media in opera and operatic forms, to thematise the very problems and conditions of making music theatre, and to "develop non-score based devising and improvisatory processes for music theatre challenging the hierarchical meta-physics of most music-theatre production" (Till in Roesner 2012, 354).

This is also, I would argue, where Composed Theatre in a stricter sense differs from a wider field of contemporary or "new" music theatre (see Salzmann/Desi 2008). With regard to the nature and scope of its experimental nature. Contemporary music theatre can be innovative *within* a given institutional, hierarchical and aesthetic framework, which it may "bend" at times. (In my view, this applies to productions like *The Queen with No Land* or *Xochicuicatl Cuecuechtli.*) Composed Theatre however—like Paradise Interrupted, *The Source*, or others—explicitly or implicitly abandons these frameworks and their assumptions and premises. Its experiments operate on more levels than on the work's mere aesthetic surface. It tries new forms of authorship, of production methods, of understandings of "skill" or professional identities. It also seeks to re-negotiate relations between spatial, sonic, performative, visual, atmospheric, notational, as well as conceptual aspects of music theatre and experiments with new causalities, simultaneities, and interferences.

4. Composed Theatre engages in a complex process of meaning-making, social interaction, and political significance by employing the "detour" of musical thinking as a means of abstraction

Transferring theatrical events into compositional structures has implications for the creative process and has in many cases led to a high degree of self-referentiality in Composed Theatre. On the one hand, Composed Theatre cannot, I believe, ever be "absolute" in analogy to absolute music (which is, of course, a problematic concept in itself), due to its expanded material and due to being 'tainted' by the meaning-laden spatial, temporal and physical conditions of theatre as a semiotic process, On the other hand, by engaging with and drawing on the more formal "grammar" of music and musical composition, Composed Theatre inevitably both complicates and sidesteps the more immediate semiotic strategies of *mimesis* of human action, psychological plausibility of dialogue, or overall dramatic narrativity.

Tsangaris employs a metaphor, which I find very useful and would like to use here. When asked about the meaning of his pieces, he calls his compositions abstract constructions, which however had a semantic cave behind them (see Roesner 2012, 356). This brings to the forefront the particular relationship of abstraction and meaning, of signification and association, thematised as a unique relationship in Composed Theatre. It is, I would argue, a variation of the Platonic allegory of the cave. Plato famously likens our capacity to perceive reality to that of people in a cave, forced to see only shadows on a wall cast by things passing in front of a fire behind their backs. People ascribe form and meaning to the shadows and perceive them as reality.

7. For a detailed discussion of both intermediality and interartiality see Müller 1998.

Fig. 4: Paradise Interrupted

In Tsangaris' metaphor the relationship is somewhat different: it is about the relationship of (abstract) form (of sound and vision) and semantic meaning. In theatrical forms dominated by narration (e.g., "straight" theatre, opera, narrative ballet), the physical entities on stage (e.g., the bodies, sounds, lights, props, etc.) usually have relatively unequivocal semiotic meaning and narrative function. They are not limited to this function, but it is closely "attached" to them. In Composed Theatre, this connection is often much looser and more ambiguous. Since in many cases the physical entities have been introduced and placed for *compositional* reasons, their meaning is not predominantly semantic or even narrative. However, within a performance space that can be understood as "theatre", they find themselves in a semantically charged cave. Their abstract form is reflected and echoed from "den Brettern, die die Welt bedeuten"[8] ["the boards that mean/signify the world"], and are thus charged with and tainted by associations and echoes of meaning that we cannot directly attribute to the entities themselves. One might liken this to the way that wine or whiskey takes on some of the aromas of the casks in which they are kept, allowing us to detect flavours in the finished drink that do not have their origin in the grape or grain, from which they are distilled.

In contrast to Plato's prisoners, in Composed Theatre we see and hear both the thing itself and its shadows or echoes, but, one might say, the position of the fire is unknown and changing, so that the attribution of meaning to a source or signifier is "unfinalizable", as Mikhail Bakhtin would call it (see Morson/Emerson 1990, 32-37).

There is, as I have mentioned earlier, also an animated discussion of whether the audience needs to understand or grasp the conceptual setup, the compositional and structural coherence of a piece. Does Composed Theatre need to "reveal" or even explain its processes, concepts, and strategies in order to be understood? In theatre, audiences react to aesthetic surfaces (e.g., "I liked the costumes"), to meaning (e.g., "I understood what it was about"), and to emotion derived from narrative (e.g., "I empathised with the character"). With music, there tends to be a slightly different trifold attraction: the pleasure of music is derived again from its aesthetic surface (e.g., "I liked the singer's voice"), from analytical insight (e.g., "I understood how it was done"), and from emotional responses to the sounding phenomena and their capacity to create or evoke emotional memories (e.g., "It was beautifully sad"). Audiences can freely switch between these different aspects, but the point is that Composed Theatre takes on some of the qualities of music in that it caters to a perception allowing itself to be less concerned with "what it means" and more with "how it is done", as well as with aesthetic and emotional appreciation. I do not, for example, need to understand the meaning of the stunning visual spectacle of Paradise Interrupted to appreciate its compositional beauty.

Finally, if we think about it, there is also a political aspect to this shift in perception. It is the emancipation of the aesthetic form from its immediate semantic functionality. In a world where any sound, light, image or gesture has a clear, often economically driven function, and can serve as a coded message (e.g., "press me", "buy me", "watch out", "come here", "go away", "trust me", etc.), it is a political act to problematize and experiment with this interplay of aesthetics and functionality, or, in other words, this interplay of form and meaning.

8. This phrase, coined by Friedrich Schiller in his poem "An die Freude" (1803), has become a stock phrase in German metonymically referring to the stage or the theatre in general.

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PROF. DR. DAVID ROESNER (MUNICH)

Prof Dr David Roesner is Professor for Theatre and Music-Theatre at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich. He previously worked at the Universities of Hildesheim, Exeter and Kent. In 2003 he published his first monograph on 'Theatre as Music' and later won the Thurnau Award for Music-Theatre Studies for his article "The politics of the polyphony of performance" in 2007. Recent publications include Theatre Noise. The Sound of Performance (with Lynne Kendrick, CSP, 2011), Composed Theatre. Aesthetics, Practices, Processes (with Matthias Rebstock, Intellect, 2012) and his latest monograph Musicality in Theatre. Music as Model, Method and Metaphor in Theatre-Making (Ashgate 2014).

For a full list of publications and projects see: http://mhn.academia.edu/DavidRoesner.

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