

Traces of Meaning

Contradictions in Contemporary Opera¹

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I. Rhetoric Character Versus Emancipation of Sound

Never during its 400 year history has music-theatre² been as multifaceted – at least on its surface – as during the past decades. It ranges from the traditional Literaturoper of Aribert Reimann, Hans Werner Henze, the early Matthias Pintscher or Peter Eötvös (and most Anglo-Saxon mainstream opera productions can be counted into that category); to the experimental works for music theatre composed for traditional opera houses by Mark Andre, Helmut Lachemann, or Chaya Czernowin; to works that are written without the limitations of traditional opera companies and that incorporate new media, new types of collaboration, and new forms of presentations (many of the multimedia works that have been composed during the past decades can be included into this category: from Steve Reich's *The Cave* to the work of Heiner Goebbels.) As diverse as this landscape of forms and appearances seems to be, it is nevertheless marked by a fundamental unifying contradiction, which can be found in almost all contemporary compositions for stage, and the articulation and analysis of this fundamental contradiction – the aim of this text – seems to be crucial for leading contemporary opera production out of its corner of insignificance. It is the contradiction between the tendency towards a liberation of sound on one hand (a tendency that has been intrinsic to New Music from its beginnings) and between music's functionalization for narration, illustration, and expression in the genre of opera on the other hand. No music theatre concept since 1945 can sidestep this contradiction. Most contemporary opera works avoid facing this antinomy of a quest for acoustic emancipation of sound versus its subordination to a theatrical narrative (however that narrative might be defined) and the current crisis in opera lies precisely in this attitude of avoidance.³

Western art music is from its beginning intrinsically tied to language. This connection is not inflexible, though, but in constant flux: the points of contact as well as the degree of independence changes incessantly. From speech-like recitation in early Gregorian Chant to the complex autonomous

musical structures of the *Ars Subtilior*, from the *espressivo* of the *Seconda Pratica* to the periodic structures of the First Viennese School, to Schoenberg's musical prose, and the non-linguistic cells in late Webern: the history of Western music can be studied as a history of its relation to language.

Theodor W. Adorno writes in "Musik, Sprache und ihr Verhältnis im gegenwärtigen Komponieren":

Music is similar to language. Expressions like musical idiom or musical accent are not metaphors. But music is not language. Its similarity to language points to its innermost nature, but also toward something vague. The person who takes music literally as language will be led astray by it. / Music is similar to language in that it is a temporal succession of articulated sounds that are more than just sound. They say something, often something humane. [...] But what is said cannot be abstracted from the music; it does not form a system of signs. [...] / The distinguishing element is commonly sought in the fact that music has no concepts. But quite a few things in music come rather close to the "primitive concepts" that are dealt with in epistemology. It makes use of recurring symbols, insignia that bear the stamp of tonality. If not concepts, tonality has, in any case, generated vocables: first the chords, which are always to be used in identical function, even wornout combinations like the steps of a cadence, themselves often merely melodic phrases that reformulate the harmony.⁴

The schools of New Music in Europe that dominated the compositional discourse after 1945 are defined by a tendency towards dissolution of traditional relations between music and language. The rhetoric characteristics of tonal musical figures and its reference towards extra-musical content (all forms of expression and – in a larger sense – of program) stood in the way of integral serialism's attempts of an all-encompassing self-referentiality. All "content", all the narration of integral serial music lies in its own sonorous properties and in the specific rules (the "grammar") in place for a single musical work: the utopia of complete liberation of acoustics from rhetoric and extramusical illustrative functions, from anything other than sound itself. Looking back at this emancipatory movement Helmut Lachenmann writes:

It is generally accepted that during the fifties – the period of reconstruction in Europe after the 'catastrophe' – it was the structuralist approach which opened up new avenues and new perspectives for composition. Only with the help of this approach did music finally shake off the stale, implausible,

anachronistic, dissonant, murky rhetorical insistency of the tonal idiom which had come between listener and sounds. Music abandoned its attempt to be a language and came out in its true colors as a non-linguistic structure which is nevertheless eloquent and capable of expression in an uncomfortably indirect manner. On the assumption – which we now recognize to have been spurious – that they were making a clean start, they rejected out of hand the current concept of music, completely rethought musical material and, starting from the fundamental physical nature of sound and time, developed rules and relationships based on these which enabled them to reformulate the very idea of musical material and create an awareness that it had to be constantly reformulated anew.⁵

Referencing something beyond its own acoustic properties is intrinsic to music written for the stage, though. It articulates something beyond its own sound, as different as this “something” might be for the numerous forms of music-theatre, and as different as the vocabulary and the syntax utilized for articulation might be. The iconoclastic tendency of integral serialism challenges opera in its core. The relations between music and language in music theatre have always been vague, nebulous, multilayered, labyrinthine, or, to quote the Dramaturge and former Director of the Stuttgart Opera Klaus Zehelein: they have always been “dirty”. Opera is the genre of “dirty” semantics per se, of tangled signs that could never be entirely integrated into the clean slate movement of integral serialism. At the same time – and here the genre’s contradiction intensifies – opera deals in its core as intensely as maybe no other art-form with the topic of the autonomous, self-liberating individual. Opera has the potential for (almost) immediate expression through the assertion of individuality in the physicality of singing, through the presence of emphatic singularity, which can be experienced in the singing voice; it lets us experience a promise of overcoming the external medium of language, reaching towards (almost) un-mediated, unbroken expression.

Therefore, opera can give a voice to the individual like no other art. It can promise the utopia not only of liberation from social and political repression (as subject matters of the genre from Monteverdi’s *Poppea* to Berg’s *Wozzeck*, from *Figaro* to *Tristan* have always focused on), but also from the confines of verbal representation and signification. In great moments of opera sound itself is protagonist and expression at the same time – it signifies itself, it points to its own autonomous presence and no longer signifies or represents something outside of itself.

To say that operas are more difficult to write does not mean that they are impossible. That would only follow if we should cease to believe in free will and personality altogether. Every

high C accurately struck demolishes the theory that we are the irresponsible puppets of fate or chance.⁶

The contradiction between a tendency towards emancipation of sound from its narrative function on the one hand, and the illustrative or expressive demands of the genre on the other hand seem inextricable. Therefore, solutions offered by composers of music-theater-works during the past decades are mostly evasive maneuvers ignoring this core contradiction rather than facing it. Two general tendencies of avoidance stand out: “Literaturoper” and “cocooning”.

Already in its hierarchy of text-forms (literary original libretto setting to music) Literaturoper defines a functionalization of sound as a mere vehicle for the narration and illustration of an extra-musical story. Large leaps in the vocal line as an illustration of exasperation; soft string consonances represent an idyll; bruitist percussion thunders as an invasion of primitivism; fast repetitions or runs as a depiction of nervousness – the dictionary of functionalized musical stereotypes utilized in Literaturoper could go on for many pages. The underlying compositional position is regressive. Under the pretext of accessibility and comprehensibility the core of what could be accessed and comprehended is left out: the non-stereotypical possibilities of the emancipated sonorous material and its promise of freedom. In my opinion audiences perceive this (from a producer’s standpoint) seemingly “safe” musical language with a certain distance, but in the end they remains untouched by these Bildungsburger aesthetics reproducing musical clichés. A different expressivity in sound, a different relation between the sonic structure of a vocal line and what it sings about, is not pursued, but instrumental and vocal figures have to limit themselves instead to a vocabulary of well established expressive stereotypes and bow completely to the illustration of a story. Cinema and television are better in this, and every member of the audience knows that the Dolby-Surround-Sound of a production like *Batman* or *Titanic* lets us experience a similarly illustrative musical attitude with much more expansive means.

The second evasive maneuver could be described as “cocooning”. It is defined by composers’ tendencies of encapsulation against all references of the music that might point beyond the purely sonorous self-reference and that could signify theatrical, visual, or narrative meaning. These works, while their musical idiom (or better: musical structure) is solely organized in regards to acoustic properties and relations, signifying only its own acoustic characteristics, claim to be opera or music theatre simply for their semantic Überbau (superstructure): they are placed in relation to non-musical narratives through the addition of a title or a program note, without opening their own musical material and its grammar in any way to this narrative. The critique articulated by the stage director Michael von zur Mühlen in *Die Deutsche Bühne, “Tai Chi im Zwielficht”*⁷ (“Tai Chi in Semidarkness”), expresses the helplessness of a theatre-artist facing a “cocooning” opera score. He finds

himself increasingly confronted with contemporary works for music theatre that reference non-musical narratives only in their title, but shy away of all semantic “dirt”, of any Babel of signs in the actual score, to avoid the dangers of a functionalization of the music. One could count into that tendency of cocooning all those works that associatively attach themselves to non-musical images, without allowing their signs and references to truly enter the musical structure (with the exception of a few surface tautologies). This does not solve the fundamental contradiction of acoustic emancipation versus sound as a vehicle for narratives in opera.

II. Narratives in Music Theatre – Individual Concepts

Approaches towards a solution for the contradiction described above can neither be found in submission (Literaturoper) nor encapsulation (cocooning) but rather in unique answers, in individual attempts that consciously reflect inside the structure of the score itself this conflict of emancipatory tendency and illustrative demands. There cannot be a universal solution to this contradiction. No new opera reform is needed that would react to the mentioned evasive maneuvers with precise formal and expressive rules, but we need immanent opera criticism: compositions that search for new solutions to the aforementioned contradiction from the singular perspective of their specific sonorous and scenic material and their specific subject matter.

Salvatore Sciarrino’s works for theatre articulate such individual attempts. His music clearly does not shun the rhetoric gesture, the musical sign precisely pointing towards extramusical content. But almost never does the musical idiom in his numerous quite differently configured scores simply make use of an off the shelf catalogue of expressive vocabulary. Quite to the contrary: the musical expressions always seem to exist at the border of silence. The numerous quasi-baroque figures, ornaments, or rhetoric gestures come out of nowhere and disappear as fast as they entered the stage. The instrumental gestures are experienced as small eruptions of an immediate moment – they step out of the world of noise to take on for a very brief moment the shape of an expression, only to submerge themselves back into noise. It is an expressive landscape in the borderland between silence and articulated sound, which inscribes into every musical figure the danger of disappearance into noise. Furthermore, one can find in Sciarrino’s music numerous elements that are defined by their elementary acoustic proximity to the human body. Heart-beat and breathing are human articulations that are placed before (or beyond?) intentional expressive language. Nevertheless, one can say that an accelerating heartbeat or fading respiration “speak” volumes.

Helmut Lachenmann’s *Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* articulates a truly radical redefinition of musical meaning. It lies in a focus on the expressive potential of basic physical processes (in this one aspect quite similar to Sciarrino’s work) and their offering of an almost immediate musical language

freed of idiomatic stereotypes. Human experience of cold is expressed immediately – without the medium of descriptive language – through the body: trembling, chattering teeth, blowing into hands to warm oneself. Starting out from these expressions that have not yet hardened into words (although the step from trembling to the onomatopoeic German word “bibbern” seems very small), Lachenmann undertakes an investigation of sound as sign. These signs hardly ever become symbols, where their actual physical or acoustic configuration would have nothing in common any more with whatever content it references, but the direct connection between sound and signified remains always intact: the “Ritsch” of the matchstick; the multiple “white noise” type sounds expressing coldness (the lack of periodic vibration); the traffic signified through Doppler-effects. (Lachenmann mentions that as an early compositional step he scanned the original stories for the potential of these sound/ sign connections).

It is the concept of a onomatopoeic musical idiom, which does not force the musical figure into a mere vehicle for non-musical meaning, but lets meaning and sound unite: sound can continue its self-referentiality while at the same time referencing something extra musical (“cold”; “traffic”; “Ritsch”). This concept of onomatopoeic expression stands quite unique in the current landscape of opera writing in its radical and expansive approach towards musical expression. (One should not overlook, though, how far stretched at points this approach appears to be – the wooden slippers expressed through woodblock rattling is one example where the acoustic link between content and sonorous signification can drift towards crossword-puzzle-code.)

Chaya Czernowin’s *Pnima* might be the opera that gives the most individual answer to the conflict of sonorous emancipation and referential demands of opera. The specific musical language of the piece is inextricably connected with its topic: the speechlessness of Holocaust survivors and the resulting suffering of the generations that followed, and at the same time the longing of both generations for a way to express their experience. Czernowin finds a form of musical articulation for this expressive speechlessness, one that constantly struggles for expression, and where the borderland between creature-like scream, articulate language, and silence is explored over and over again. The work neither utilizes expressive stereotypes nor does it establish or rely on any kind of musical idiom that could be abstracted from the work itself and harden into some kind of general vocabulary. That *Pnima* was given as an example for “cocooning” in the discussion mentioned above⁸ is based on the misunderstanding of its refusal of stereotypical musical images being a result of expressive hermeticism. The opposite is true: its incredibly intensive struggle for expression is wide open in its vulnerability and at the same full of potential for non-musical references.

In my opera *Fremd* the contradiction of emancipation of sound and its functionalization in a non-musical narrative lies in the center of the story itself.

Below the surface of Medea's and the Argonauts' encounter and its resulting conflict, which eventually leads to catastrophe, lies the conflict between Medea's world of (almost) immediate expression of nature through non-conceptualized and non-rationalized sound on one side, and the rationalizing grip on sound and nature by the Greek "Heroes" on the other side. The development of this is realized in the score by several motions towards dissolution and consolidation. Musical material that is purposely well-defined in its illustrative stereotypes is positioned either as beginning or end-point of these motions. "Drift" – the first scene of the opera – starts off as a catalogue (or dictionary) of such idioms, defined by as many different contexts as the catalogue of heroes in the original *Argonautica*, on which the scene is based, suggests.⁹ As the Argonauts leave their homeland further and further behind, their musical vocabulary loses its referentiality, and more and more the acoustic aspect of the musical figures liberates itself from serving purely illustrative functions.

The second scene pursues a similar process of dissolution: beginning with a unified musical idiom, though, that of belcanto-choir-expressions, which disintegrate even more than the musical figures in the first scene. At the end of this dissolution only phonetic elements remain. This movement is contrasted by Medea's music, which is starting out from radically fragmented vocal expression. Her articulations jump from tongue-clicks to forcefully sung notes, from "sh"-consonants to whistling, to throat gurgles. Gradually, though, and obviously influenced by the Argonauts' music, her vocalization is channeled into linearity, increasingly defined by full singing. Medea herself becomes almost drunk by the periodic vibration and the emphatic potential of her own singing. Her entirely liberated fully sung vocal line at the climax of the scene is a balancing act between the expression of non-musical meaning and pure sound or maybe for a moment the unity of both. It eventually ossifies in a melody, though, that is – while an expansive and of powerful gesture – defined entirely in its harmonic and rhythmic structure by the Argonauts.

The third and (except for the epilogue) last scene, might be most clearly "theatre-music". Here Medea's development of rationalization and functionalization is turned upside down. The scene begins with literal quotations from Cherubini's *Medea*, increasingly coming under attack by figures of raw, undomesticated sound: white noise, wild glissandos, multiphonics, distorted tones. They cut like a knife through the exposed objectified idioms of repertoire opera. But these processes of infringement or violation themselves become increasingly rationalized (and more and more resemble the musical language they initially attacked) and they eventually sweep everything along: one large disintegrating centrifuge that tears apart all musical expressions, all musical syntax.

Fremd is the attempt to tell the story of Medea and the Argonauts by neither simply utilizing a stable vocabulary and grammar of a given musical language nor by evading any musical signs, but by understanding that the

search for traces of musical meaning, their continuation, amplification and last but not least their destruction is part of the story itself.

The individual concepts in the works by Chaya Czernowin, Helmut Lachenmann, Salvatore Sciarrino as well as in my own opera *Fremd* do not offer a reproducible answer to the contradiction inherent in contemporary opera, the conflict of liberating tendencies towards sound itself versus the illustrative demands one the music for the opera's story. Their individual solutions to this conflict cannot become models for other works to follow, since the promise of liberation that opera has implied since its beginnings is in its core a promise of individuality. The mentioned works might have model character only in the radicality in which they investigate traces of meaning in sound, and in which they search for narratives of sounds that are more than just music that illustrates a story. In the openness of their investigations one can find an openness towards the stage and theatre in general, which itself is not forced to simply illustrate the music, but sets out just as individually as the music in following these traces of meaning, and to be led by them into different directions or abandon them altogether. Opera as a genre can only be reasserted through highly individual concepts that are intrinsically open-ended investigations. In a time where the illustration of stories, and the complete and technologically perfected functionalization of sound and image in television and cinema has become almost ubiquitous, an alternative concept of narration, sound, and theatre seems only possible in the form and language of an entirely open-ended quest.

1 A version of this text was first published in German in: Klaus Zehelein and Anke Roeder: *Die Kunst der Dramaturgie*, München 2011.

2 The term 'music theatre' is always used as a broad category for theatre with music as a main medium and includes opera just as much as more experimental forms.

3 The strive for the liberation of sound in New Music since the 1950s, for the autonomy of its acoustic, and physical materiality has obvious parallels in the developments of contemporary theatre: the re-assertion of physicality and presence against the traditional dominance of "literature" (for example in Artaud's work). A detailed analysis of those parallels would go beyond the scope of this text.

4 Theodor W. Adorno: "Music, Language, and Composition", transl. Susan Gillespie, in: *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (Autumn 1993), pp. 401–414.

5 Helmut Lachenmann: "On Structuralism", in: *Contemporary Music Review*, No. 12 (1995), pp. 93–102.

6 W. H. Auden: "Notes on Music and Opera", in: *The Dyers Hand and other Essays*, New York 1962.

7 Michael von zur Mühlen: "Tai Chie im Zwielficht". in: *Die Deutsche Bühne* 8/2008.

8 *Die Deutsche Bühne*.

9 Apollonios from Rhode: *The Argonautica*.