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Recent Approaches to Experimental Music Theatre and Contemporary Opera¹

The last two decades or so have seen a small paradigm change throughout the arts and humanities. Where, not so long ago, everything was regarded as 'text' or 'discourse', scholars are now more likely to talk about 'performance' and 'the performative' and 'the body' or 'the bodily'. It is easy to be cynical about fashionable jargon, but, when cogently employed, the nomenclature does suggest, if not a revolution, then a significant shift in emphasis. While, as so often, there has been a certain time lag, music studies have not been exempt from this development. One obvious example is the growth in performance analysis (although it can be argued that this has as much to do with the need to find academic content for MA courses in performance – certainly not all practitioners seem to be aware of the larger methodological context of their work).

The area of music studies that would seem to profit most from the changing climate is opera studies. The insight that the musical work cannot be equated with a score and that performance is more than the execution of an ideally self-sufficient text, which was so hard-won in the field as a whole, is nowhere as seemingly self-evident as in opera. For a serious engagement with opera as a dramatic spectacle, performance must be seen as primary and the score principally as the incarnation of potential performances. Likewise, no other genre illustrates quite so clearly that music is an embodied art involving human action, and which cannot be reduced to its acoustic dimension. (It is therefore important to recognise that performance analysis and the analysis of recorded music are two

¹ I am grateful to Nicholas Till for his valuable comments to a draft version of this article.

different things.) Opera uniquely fuses the most evanescent and abstract of arts with the most concrete physical manifestation.

While the change in perceptions currently underway may thus influence the study of traditional opera, it is vital for an understanding of contemporary opera and in particular experimental music theatre, since in the last case the practice itself, and not only its subsequent theorising, must be seen in the context of the growing sensitivity towards performativity. Just as modern dance had in part been a response to the critique of language at the beginning of the twentieth century (the so-called Sprachkrise),² so the new forms of theatre and spectacle developing chiefly in the second half of the twentieth century, such as the happening, performance art and physical theatre, challenged logocentricity, and, as a consequence, the exclusive reign of propositional logic and instrumental reason. It is to these forms of mixed media that experimental music theatre is most indebted – more so than to conventional opera, with its prioritising of illusionism and narrative (which arguably became even more problematic in traditional opera's pseudo-modernist legacy in Literaturoper). Experimental music theatre therefore perfectly illustrates the kind of holistic understanding of music which music studies on the whole seem to be striving for.

Nevertheless, rather than growing in importance, opera studies seem to have lost ground within the discipline as a whole; nor are there many indications that they are at the 'cutting edge' when it comes to theoretical approaches, despite Carolyn Abbate's seminal work and many other accomplished publications.³ Contemporary opera and

² See Katja Schneider, 'Verschwinden des Tanzes aus der Choreographie?', Experimentelles Musik-und Tanztheater. Ed. By Frieder Reininghaus and Katja Schneider in connection with Sabine Sanio. pp. 391. Handbuch der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert, vol. 7 (Laaber, Laaber, 2004, €98. ISBN 3-89007-427-8), 362.

³ Carolyn Abbate, Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) and eadem, In Search of Opera (Princeton:

experimental music theatre have hardly appeared on the horizon, and, despite impressive approaches, there simply seems to be a lack of critical mass for a sophisticated sustained discourse to establish itself. Understandably, new territory first has to be charted descriptively before it can be explored in greater depth.

Three recent sizable volumes could address the demand for serious intellectual engagement with contemporary opera and experimental music theatre. All three are (mostly) in German, which is indicative of the larger role played by music theatre in German music studies – but perhaps also of different publishing traditions (which will be explored below). They all share the word Musiktheater in their titles, which in German is an umbrella term that encompasses opera as well as alternative forms of music theatre (which is useful).

The first, Musiktheater im Spannungsfeld zwischen Tradition und Experiment,⁴ is the proceedings of a conference held as long ago as 1994. Proceedings publications have gone out of fashion in the English-speaking world, and on the basis of this volume one can see why. That is not necessarily a reflection of the quality of the individual contributions, some of which are quite remarkable, but of the rationale of a book like this, and who it is actually addressed to. Of 378 pages (including the index and many illustrations) the volume comprises no fewer than 34 chapters. Most of these present little more than short introductions to individual, often relatively obscure, works, which usually remain on a fairly descriptive level. While it is valuable to read about under-explored operatic traditions, such as in Norway (Olav Anton Thommesen, 'Remarks on

Princeton University Press, 2001). Without wanting to denigrate other equally compelling publications, I wish to particularly draw attention to Michelle Duncan, 'The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body: Voice, Presence, Performativity', Cambridge Opera Journal, 16 (2004), 283-306.

⁴ Musiktheater im Spannungsfeld zwischen Tradition und Experiment (1960-1980). Ed. by Christoph-Hellmut Mahling and Kristina Pfarr. pp. ix + 378. Mainzer Studien zur Musikwissenschaft, vol. 41 (Schneider, Tutzing, 2002, €78. ISBN 3-79521098-4.)

the Chamber Opera *The Duchess Dies*', 15-23), Portugal (Mário Vieira de Carvalho, 'Bühnenexperiment und politisches Engagement in den 60er Jahren: eine szenische Kantate von Lopes-Graça', 35-42) and Bulgaria (Rumen Neykov, 'Das Musiktheater Bulgariens zur Zeit der Wende', 257-62), the articles are too short to present more than sketchy pictures.

On the whole, the contributions are far too disparate for a broader perspective or different trends to emerge – whether in terms of subject matter or methodological approach. What is more, the editors have made no perceptible attempt to chart any connections between different articles: there is no introduction and no appreciable order to the articles, nor are they grouped into larger chapters. The tension between tradition and experiment mentioned in the title – itself rather clichéd – is never specifically explored in the book. It is therefore not quite clear what the intended use of the book is. Some articles may represent the first critical introductions to the works concerned and are therefore of some value, and there are also a number of noteworthy articles, such as Inge Kovács's account of the controversy between Mauricio Kagel and Bernd Alois Zimmermann ('Der Darmstädter Kongreß "Neue Musik – Neue Szene" 1966', 25-34),⁵ Jürg Stenzl's exploration of Wolfgang Rihm's engagement with history ('Keine Antike. Zum *Oedipus* (1987) von Wolfgang Rihm', 69-82), Martin Zenck's elucidation of the gradualism between chamber music and (often implicit) theatre in several seminal works from the period in question ('Entgrenzung der Gattungen Kammermusik und Szene in Werken von Michael von Biel, Mauricio Kagel, Bernd Alois Zimmermann und Luigi Nono', 123-42), Heiner Goebbels's explanations of his own music-theatrical practices

⁵ However, much of the material has appeared earlier in Pascal Decroupet and Inge Kovács, 'Musik und Szene', in Im Zenit der Moderne: Die Internationalen Ferienkurse für Neue Musik Darmstadt 1946–1966, ed. Gianmario Borio and Hermann Danuser, 4 vols (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1997), vol. 2, 311–32.

(‘Geräusche für die 90er – Alternativen zur Oper’, 179-84) and Silke Leopold’s incursions into the nitty-gritty of operatic dramaturgy on the basis of what she herself appears to regard as a failure (‘Ist *Hamlet* ein Opernstoff? Zu Humphrey Searles *Hamlet*-Oper’, 299-304). Nevertheless, the whole is rather less than the sum of its parts: the time and effort needed to read this book from cover to cover stands in negative relation to the insights gained.

In defence, it could be argued that the publication presents an accurate record of the conference it covers: contributions are followed by accounts of the discussion (which rarely add much to the articles themselves), and many indications of oral delivery, such as direct address of the audience, have been left unchanged (which can be quite irritating). But who actually benefits from that? The editors’ off-hand approach is also perceptible in the failure to ensure a certain level of orthographic consistency: that Paul van Reijen, a native Dutch speaker, in his contribution ‘Das holländische Musiktheater in den Jahren 1960-1980: ein stilistisches “Labyrinth”’ (143-58), speaks consistently of ‘Bolivia’ instead of ‘Bolivien’, as the country is called in German, is just one of many examples. Given that there are hardly any signs of editorial intervention, it is anyone’s guess why it took eight years to produce the book. If the editors had made an informed selection of a handful of pertinent articles in a specific area or a small number of different areas, and if the authors would have been given the chance to develop their arguments in greater detail, and if these contributions would then have been grouped together and introduced, this would have been a much more useful book.

Although likewise based on a conference, Musiktheater heute⁶ manages to avoid many of the flaws of the earlier book discussed here. The individual contributions are

⁶ Musiktheater heute: Internationales Symposium der Paul Sacher Stiftung Basel 2001. Ed. by Hermann Danuser in collaboration with Matthias Kassel, pp. 445. Veröffentlichungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung, vol. 9 (Schott, Basle and Mainz, 2003, €32. ISBN 3-7957-0481-2.)

more extensive (17 pieces on 435 – albeit generously spaced – pages), and they are differentiated into ‘Text-Dramaturgie’, ‘Musik-Dramaturgie’ and ‘Bild-Dramaturgie’ (the last being particularly welcome since musicologists tend to be literally blind to it) – a categorisation that makes good sense and proves helpful. This is framed by two wide-ranging position statements by Rudolf Kelterborn (‘Musiktheatermusik in unserer Zeit’, 33-46) and Wulf Konold (‘Oper – Anti-Oper – Anti-Anti-Oper’, 47-60) at the beginning as well as an interview (‘Klaus Hubers *Schwarzerde*. Der Komponist im Gespräch mit Anton Haefeli’, 377-94) and a round-table discussion with Sylvain Cambreling, John Dew, Mauricio Kagel, Wolfgang Rihm, Michael Schindhelm, Jürg Stenzl and Jürg Wyttenbach, chaired by Peter Ruzicka (‘Musiktheater – eine Institution in der Krise?’, 395-436) at the end. A very perceptive introduction by Hermann Danuser (11-29) confirms the impression of a much more cohesive volume than Musiktheater im Spannungsfeld. The contributors, many of whom were also represented in Musiktheater im Spannungsfeld, are mostly drawn from the composers and scholars associated with the Paul Sacher Foundation as well as the wider circles around them, but this is hardly a problem for the book.

The articles themselves are generally of a high quality. Kelterborn and Konold present magisterial overviews of the state of the genre, the former from a composer’s perspective, the latter from that of a scholar, Dramaturg and theatre director. Both tend to err in the opposite direction from that practised by many writers in Musiktheater im Spannungsfeld: where the latter lost sight of the general in their exclusive focus on the particular, Kelterborn and Konold both illustrate the different tendencies they perceive with long lists of works that are discussed summarily, when one would have hoped for more in-depth analyses that could elucidate their concepts. Kelterborn presents an essentially conservative argument, according to which music has to be defended from the hegemony of the visual, which he associates with Regietheater (a position

vehemently affirmed later on by Klaus Huber in his interview – if on account of concrete circumstances). In doing so, he is perhaps too ready to dispense value judgements. Konold, for his part, describes the development of music theatre in the second half of the twentieth century as a dialectic between opera, anti-opera and, as some kind of synthesis, anti-anti-opera. This interpretation has a lot going for it, but it presents slightly too narrow and inflexible a framework for the diversity of developments during this period. As a result, some of Konold's judgements are somewhat sweeping, particular in his treatment of Mauricio Kagel's *Staatstheater*, which he reduces to a simple negation of operatic tradition.

In the section on 'Text-Dramaturgie', Albert Gier, writing from the perspective of romance literature and, in particular, libretto studies, makes a compelling case for interpreting the challenge to language in a number of contemporary operas in the light of Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of 'post-dramatic theatre'⁷ – a much-discussed theory in German-speaking countries ('Sprachskepsis und Sprachverlust im zeitgenössischen Musiktheater', 63-83). Unfortunately, he, too, reels off long lists of examples where one would wish for more detailed analyses of a small sample of test cases, which would help to assess the heuristic qualities of his approach. Siegfried Mauser, then, explains different tendencies in music theatre in terms of a binarism between narrative and imagistic-ritualistic ('bildhaft-ritualistisch') approaches. According to him, this dichotomy has been overcome by the youngest generation, a development exemplified by recent commissions for the Münchener Biennale ('Von großen Erzählungen und aphoristischen Tendenzen: Textdramaturgische Strategien im aktuellen Musiktheater', 85-95). Like Konold's paradigm of opera vs. anti-opera, Mauser's observation deserves exploring in more detail, although, in his own account, it does seem slightly ad hoc and generalising.

⁷ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1999).

Jürgen Maehder's examination of texts used by Luciano Berio and Sylvano Bussotti is erudite and exhaustive, if ultimately slightly inconclusive ('Zur Textbasis des Musiktheaters bei Luciano Berio and Sylvano Bussotti', 97-133). The section on 'Text-Dramaturgie' is brought to a close by Andrew Porter's "'CNN Opera": Contemporary History as the Matter of Music Drama' (135-44). While his elucidation of the historical precursors to John Adams's Nixon in China and The Death of Klinghoffer – as the most prominent representatives of the genre – is insightful, his contribution quickly turns into another catalogue of works; Porter's polemics against updating historical operas does not necessarily help his case either.

The section on 'Musik-Dramaturgie' is opened by Anne C. Shreffler's 'Instrumental Dramaturgy as Humane Comedy: *What Next?* by Elliott Carter and Paul Griffiths' (147-71), in which she elucidates Griffiths and Carter's debt to such historical precursors as Mozart's Da Ponte operas, while outlining the distance to critical and revisionary approaches to the genre, exemplified by such different works as Lachenmann's *Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern*, Huber's *Schwarzerde*, Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* and Corigliano's *The Ghosts of Versailles*. While her examination of dramaturgy in contemporary opera is particularly lucid, her approach is perhaps slightly hampered by a traditional commitment to text-music relationships. Rather than investigating the connection between musical structure and its dramatic function as suggested by the title of his article, Michael Taylor, in his 'Narrative and Musical Structures in Harrison Birtwistle's *The Mask of Orpheus* and *Yan Tan Tethera*' (173-93), mostly avoids questions of dramaturgy, focusing instead on the relatively safe terrain of musical structure, such as random number series, and accounts of the genesis of the works. Dörte Schmidt's 'Theater der Wahrnehmbarkeit: Musikalische Dramaturgie, Szene und Text in Helmut Lachenmann's *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern*' (195-212) is an altogether more courageous and arguably successful attempt at getting to grips with the

multimediality of music theatre. Particularly her engagement with mimesis and its avoidance is insightful and instructive. One wonders, though, whether a more critical approach to Lachenmann's ideas is not in order: the portrait that Schmidt – rather despite herself, it seems – depicts is of a 'traditionally avant-gardist' composer who, in his fear of impurity and of contamination by the visual, is determined to keep in complete control, with the consequence that the visual domain of his 'Music with Pictures' must always be subordinated and reducible to the music. Whether this is an ideal premise for genuine theatre is an open question.

A related but different approach of generating theatre from music forms the subject of Ulrich Mosch's 'Autonome Musikdramaturgie: Über Wolfgang Rihms *Séraphin*-Projekt' (213-34). Rihm's *Séraphin* project is a cycle of instrumental pieces inspired by Artaud, who is one of Rihm's constant references and also the source of his 'poème dansé' *Tutuguri* and the opera *Die Eroberung von Mexico*. As in Lachenmann's *Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern*, the music is thus the source of the dramatic action; yet, unlike Lachenmann, Rihm leaves a lot of space for scenic realisations – the few remarks he makes in the scores are extremely open (and, as usual with this composer, somewhat cryptic). As Mosch points out, this makes the director into a co-author on an equal footing to the composer, a position he compares to that of a choreographer. By way of illustration, Mosch lucidly discusses two realisations, one involving a video by Klaus von Bruch (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), the other a theatrical presentation by Peter Mussbach (Stuttgart, 1996). What Mosch, in his otherwise fascinating discussion, does not ask is in what ways Rihm's pieces are different from 'non-theatrical' music, and what makes them suitable for a scenic realisation: the analogy to dance may be slightly misleading in this context since dance makes use of all kinds of music, whether composed for the purpose or not. Rihm's engagement with Artaud is also touched on by Martin Zenck in his 'Antonin Artaud – Pierre Boulez – Wolfgang Rihm: Zur Re- und Transritualität im

europäischen Musiktheater' (235-61). While this aspect is more extensively covered by Mosch, the discussion of Boulez's theatrical projects contains a lot of previously unknown material, which is likely to enrich our understanding of the composer. This is framed by a wide-ranging and perceptive account of the fascination with ritual in Europe from the Blaue Reiter and the Sacre to Derrida's reception of Artaud.

The section on 'Bild-Dramaturgie' is opened by Barbara Beyer's "Der Gesang ist nicht zu Ende, aber er ist ein anderer geworden": Was wollen wir von der Oper? Was macht sie mit uns?' (265-81). Since there is generally a lack of communication between practitioners and scholars, an opportunity to hear from stage directors is always welcome. Yet, unfortunately, Beyer's contribution is frequently confused and seemingly contradictory. Her credo that opera should be 'true to life' appears under-examined: I am not sure this is what I go to the opera for, nor is it quite clear whose life we are talking about.⁸ While she is aware of the problems of historical distance, she seems less clear about issues of class, gender and sexuality – or race, for that matter. Having myself recently witnessed an upper-class (or perhaps pretend-upper-class) audience, many of them already tipsy on champagne, consume *La Cenerentola* at Glyndebourne, I was left wondering how much of the – rather problematic – class and gender politics of the opera resonated with the audience. This is not to suggest that there is no point in trying to make opera 'relevant', which is apparently Beyer's aim; but one needs to be rather more precise about what her idea of authenticity, which she defines as 'closeness to reality, genuineness and credibility of context' ['Wirklichkeitsnähe, Echtheit und Glaubwürdigkeit

⁸ I recall a BBC Radio 4 comedy in which Mozart explains the convoluted plot of his new opera to Salieri and, on the latter's scepticism, declares: 'if I want social realism, I go to the ballet'. This is of course unfair to Mozart whose operas deal with the social reality of their time in exemplary fashion. However, they do so on a level of symbolic mediation which makes it naïve to believe that 'his message' can be simply 'translated' for modern audiences.

des Zusammenhangs', 265], means in the context of opera, a genre predicated on fantasy and extravagance.

Erika Fischer-Lichte's 'Die Oper als "Prototyp des Theatralischen": Zur Reflexion des Aufführungsbegriffs in John Cages *Européras 1 & 2*' (283-308) is perhaps the most inspiring article in the volume for musicologists working in opera studies. Although she does describe Cage's chance and indeterminacy techniques, Fischer-Lichte, who is writing from the perspective of theatre research, regards the works primarily as theatre, which is to say that her focus is on what actually happens on stage and in the room, rather than on the dots on the page and how they came to be. (It is instructive to compare her account of the pieces to the more traditional musicological approach taken by Dieter Torkewitz in his 'Über Abhängiges und Unabhängiges. Zur Opernkonzepktion von John Cage und anderen' in Musiktheater im Spannungsfeld (305-14).) Her discussion of 'materiality' and 'mediality' and her description of the 'permanent collision between presence and representation' (297) in the figure of the actor-as-singer – to name just a few of the many fascinating aspects of her contribution – open up new ways of understanding the performativity of opera beyond the traditional focus on text-music relationships.

Gabriele Brandstetter's 'Figur und Placement: Körperdramaturie im zeitgenössischen Tanztheater – am Beispiel von Merce Cunningham und Meg Stuart' (309-26) is similarly foundational in outlining some of the fundamentals of modern dance by reference to two key terms. What makes Brandstetter's contribution so apt in a book on music theatre is her demonstration of the usefulness of dance terminology for describing what bodies do on stage and what their positions and actions could signify. Moreover, she argues persuasively that the overcoming of logocentricity in post-dramatic theatre is not least influenced by the development of dance. Another neighbouring field to music theatre, film music, is the subject of Fred van der Kooij's 'Akustische Epiphanien im Kino: Die

Aufgabe des Tons im Reich des Sichtbaren, gezeigt am Film *Suna no onna*' (327-74). In this case, however, the approach is arguably less productive, particularly given the article's length. That is not to say that it is not interesting – on the contrary, it is partly fascinating – but its relation to music theatre remains unclear. While film music and music theatre share certain aspects, they are quite different in terms of technique, tradition and aesthetics; more importantly, van der Kooij makes no attempt to relate his rather detailed analysis of one particular film, Hiroshi Teshigahara's *The Woman in the Dunes* (also *The Woman of the Dunes*), with music by Toru Takemitsu, to wider questions. Although this is not the place for an in-depth discussion of the article, it is worth noting that, whatever the strengths of his analysis, van der Kooij's obsession with the artistic integrity and autonomy of music seems inappropriate when dealing with a subject such as film music. Indeed, his low opinion of Takemitsu as a composer of instrumental music drives van der Kooij to suggest that the music to *Suna no onna* was really inspired by Xenakis: only the latter would have had the genius that the author ascribes to the music!

Whether the publication of the interview and panel discussion which follow was well advised is a moot point. Both raise plenty of interesting questions, but, in general, written text is a poor substitute for spoken as well as gestural language. What must have been lively interactions are somewhat dry to read and lacking in precision (which they probably weren't in the original discussions); radio broadcasts would be more suitable in this case. Furthermore, particularly the round table contains many topical references whose relevance was clear in Basel in 2001, but which have since lost some of their significance (particularly for readers outside the German-speaking world), and which will soon become altogether cryptic. On the whole, though, the volume represents a significant contribution to the study of contemporary opera and music theatre, which opens up important pathways. One of its most distinguishing aspects is its

interdisciplinarity: it is particularly the contributions by Brandstetter, Fischer-Lichte and Gier that are likely to enrich the field (that van der Kooij's article is perhaps less fruitful does not invalidate the principle) – but this is not to denigrate the impressive articles by musicologists.

While the two books discussed so far were clearly intended for experts, the last, Experimentelles Musik- und Tanztheater, volume 7 of the colossal Handbuch der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert, is addressed to a wider audience: with its almost 400 pages in folio format and lots of – very useful – pictures, it is clearly aimed at the coffee table market. But that does not mean that it has nothing to offer to scholars in the field. Although most of the 99 essays by almost 50 authors summarise existing scholarship, rather than presenting radically new insights, the very breadth of tendencies covered means that there are new discoveries to be made for practically everyone; furthermore, the articles offer excellent opportunities to brush up on the less familiar territories – whether it is the Ausdruckstanz of the early twentieth century, the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s, or Robert Ashley's TV operas of the 1970s. A thorough index renders the book a useful reference work (although the rather slim bibliography is a disadvantage in this respect). Another strong point is that, in addition to the traditional focus on choreographers and composers (which is to say 'authors'), the book does discuss specific productions, and there are also chapters on, for instance, the stage director Herbert Wernicke and recent productions of works by Handel. That this revaluation of performance vis-à-vis work occurs rather unsystematically towards the end of the book suggests that it was more an afterthought and not part of the original conception – and it is not mentioned in the introduction either. Nevertheless, the idea deserves to be developed further. Last but not least, most of the chapters are informative and well-written, so that the book can on the whole be warmly recommended.

But there are also flaws, many of them significant. Some of these concern the very conception: while it sounds like a good idea to combine music theatre and dance, the two are almost always discussed side by side and hardly any reciprocal influences or parallel developments are pointed out – or where they are, this tends to be tenuous, as in the conclusion, ‘Die Furie des Verschwindens’ [The Fury of Disappearance, 363-74], when the disappearance of dance in recent choreography is regarded as analogous to the disappearance of text in music theatre. Gabriele Brandstetter’s observations in Musiktheater heute may have pointed to more integral connections. Furthermore, although the book is clearly not intended as a history of twentieth-century opera and ballet, what exactly defines experimental music and dance theatre never becomes quite clear. For the dance sections this seems less of a problem: since modern dance mostly defined itself in opposition to classical ballet, it has developed a relatively clear identity as a genre with its own tradition. Consequently, figures such as Georges Balanchine may be referred to but are not given their own chapters.

By contrast, the boundary between traditional opera and experimental music theatre is less clearly marked. Having said this, it is not difficult to establish generic markers: for instance, one could argue that traditional opera relies on the separation between stage and orchestra pit as well as on the union of singing and acting of the protagonists; both are indispensable for the maintenance of scenic illusion, which is foundational for opera. All this is denied in experimental music theatre: here music-making is the dramatic action, there is often no external reality which is represented by scenic action, and there frequently are no continuous dramatic roles which are enunciated by singing. But this is clearly not what the editors had in mind, since the bulk of the book is devoted to the legacy of traditional opera, however problematised. As a consequence, the concept of experiment remains as vague as categorical distinctions between different forms of music theatre. In the first half of the book, differentiations are made relatively

successfully: for instance, Stravinsky, Bartók, Schönberg, Schreker, Satie, Hindemith, Berg, Milhaud, Shostakovich and Janáček are included, Debussy, Strauss, Puccini and Menotti excluded (although Strauss appears in the chapter on opera and dictatorship) – the selection is debatable but defensible. But in the second half it is increasingly unclear, what criteria, if any, are employed. The last chapters seem to endeavour to mention practically every opera that was premiered in the last two decades or so, regardless of whether it is 'experimental' or downright reactionary. Criteria of value or importance do not seem to hold either – not because such distinctions are problematic: the authors rarely hesitate to pass judgement of this sort. Thus, increasingly great numbers of pieces are named, only to be 'slagged off' – what could possibly be gained from this remains unclear. While it is obviously difficult to make adequate selections, draw connections and establish frames of reference when dealing with recent work, there is little indication that the editors made significant attempts for the sections dealing with music theatre. The heading of chapter 6, which begins with the 1970s, 'Experiment Becomes the Norm' ['Experiment wird zum Regelfall', 188], could be seen to justify the policy, yet this represents hardly a commonsensical view, and it is effectively undermined by many of the examples that follow.

This is indicative of a wider problem in the second half of the book: its journalistic nature. Not only are many chapters written by journalists – that would not be a problem, as I do not wish to imply that journalists are per se incapable of producing good work – but they are often deficient in ways that seem characteristic of a certain type of journalism. One indication is the heavy reliance on quoting newspaper reviews as sources of reference – often at length, even when the quotation in question contributes little to the argument. This practice is particularly irritating when the reviewer in question is one of the authors of the book; in fact two authors somewhat indulge in quoting from one another's work. This is linked with often questionable referencing practices: while

every newspaper review is meticulously referenced, rather more substantial publications remain uncredited. Who, for instance, are the Ernst Jünger critics quoted by Frieder Reininghaus in footnote 2 on page 228? The quotations by Bloch, Adorno and Heinsheimer in the introduction (11f.) should arguably have been referenced properly as well. But by far the most problematic aspect is content: in many chapters, the authors, particularly the editor, jump from a fairly superficial description straight to a – often condemnatory – value judgement, with little recognisable attempt at understanding the pieces concerned on their own terms, or establishing a suitable frame of reference or intersubjectively meaningful criteria for judgement. We have to accept the authoritative pronouncements of the critic, a critic who apparently already knows everything and has no further questions to ask. Nor are the authors always well-informed and perceptive: to name just one example, when Frieder Reininghaus writes that Dallapiccola's Volo di notte 'ostentatiously' opposed the fascists' glorification of technological progress in general and aviation in particular (268), he falls victim to wishful thinking.⁹ What is lacking in critical insight is made up for with glib word games and stylistic mannerisms, making some of the later chapters annoying to read (although others are of a high standard, I hasten to add). One of the most overused stylistic devices is the elliptic sentence. From the myriad of examples, just three:

Dennoch ist *Candide* ein Stück der Grenzüberschreitung, das ... desweiteren das Interesse von Regisseuren auf sich zog, auch oder gerade in Europa. In Berlin und Wuppertal. Zuerst sogar in Heilbronn (März 1982). [‘Nevertheless, *Candide* is a piece

⁹ The fascist imagery in Volo di notte has been examined by Ben Earle in his ‘The Avant-Garde Artist as Superman: Aesthetics and Politics in Dallapiccola's Volo di notte’, in Italian Music During the Fascist Period, ed. Roberto Illiano (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 657-716. Although he is rather less critical, Raymond Fearn also appears to regard the work as ambiguous; see his *The Music of Luigi Dallapiccola* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 38-49.

which transcends boundaries, and which furthermore attracted the interest of directors, even or especially in Europe. In Berlin and Wuppertal. First even in Heilbronn (März 1982).’ (160)]

Und die Gretchen lasen. In einem dicken Schmöker: Goethes *Faust*. Enthoben der Zeit. [‘And the Gretchens were reading. In a big tome: Goethe’s *Faust*. Outside of time.’ (211)]

So zieht man Wurzeln! / Und wird Intendant. Sogar in Zürich. [‘That’s how one pulls out roots! / And becomes a theatre director. Even in Zurich.’ (215)]

This staccato of full stops can be a powerful expressive means, but used so indiscriminately it quickly becomes stammering. Turns into bathos. But all this should not detract from the many very good articles in the book.

To sum up, all three books have significant contributions to make towards establishing a secure foundation for the study of contemporary opera and music theatre. Experimentelles Musik- und Tanztheater is a mostly reliable introduction to and appreciation of the various music-theatrical trends in the twentieth century. Musiktheater im Spannungsfeld adds many more in-depth studies of less often discussed works. Finally, Musiktheater heute, with its commitment to interdisciplinarity and the performativity of music theatre, is most suited to further the theoretical methodology of the field. What all three avoid, perhaps tellingly, is a discussion of the contribution that opera and music theatre make to society and culture in the twenty-first century. Although the round table in Musiktheater heute does address this issue, the participants seem altogether more interested in demanding higher subsidies than in critically reflecting their own practices. Raising this point does not mean endorsing narrow notions of social

usefulness, or subscribing to the jargon of 'access' and 'outreach' schemes; rather to ask what social function music theatre performs now and is likely to in the future, including, but not limited to, that of critique.

It is important to note in conclusion that the construction of music as an embodied and performative art, as socially grounded action, rather than notated or acoustic text, which is sketched in Musiktheater heute in particular, has important ramifications for the discipline of music studies as a whole. This links in with other developments in the field which as yet await a succinct and authoritative formulation. It is arguably in this area that the study of contemporary opera and music theatre has most to contribute.