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Opera_Music_Theatre 2020

(Elisabeth van Treeck & Sid Wolters-Tiedge)

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On the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the Research Institute for Music Theatre Studies (*fimt*), the tenth issue of *ACT* – Journal for Music and Performance is dedicated to current trends in contemporary western opera and music theatre. What does it actually mean to compose or create an opera or music theatre nowadays? What are the artists' methods and approaches? What topics and questions do their compositions negotiate? What is their material, what are their media? What structures, forms, and aesthetics can we observe? Can we possibly describe some sort of general tendencies within these many different aesthetic forms of expression? And how can we grasp all of this from a scholarly perspective?

These are some of the questions addressed by the eight articles in this issue written by ten authors whose home offices are located in many places, including Australia, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Germany. Together, their texts provide a kaleidoscopic view onto a dense, but for that very reason stimulating, situation in the field of music theatre. However, as editors we would like to point out two main aspects the individual articles repeatedly draw upon in one or another way. First, there is the reflection on the relationship between 'opera' and 'music theatre' ('Musiktheater' in a wide sense) by focussing on working methods, performance venues, or the question of traditional operatic forms and dramaturgies from various angles. Second, there is a discussion about the relationship between theory and practice. Several analyses show how objects interrogate theory. Two author duos examine their own compositional practice. Conversely, other authors attempt to make abstract, philosophical concepts methodically connectable. In this way, this issue of *ACT* ultimately shows that subject matter and scholarly debate are not only closely intertwined but also reciprocally affect each other.

Two of the contributions cut a path through the thicket that is the current situation on German opera stages:

The first is by musicologist **Stefan Drees**. Starting from the observation that the examples considered in various recent publications want to be understood primarily as contemporary music theatre rather than opera, Drees in his essay casts his eye on works particularly composed for the opera and concert stage. These include Detlev Glanert's *Oceane* (2016-18), Moritz Eggert's *M - Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (2018), Sarah Nemtsov's *Sacrifice* (2016), Evan Gardner's *Gunfighter Nation* (2016), and Olga Neuwirth's *Le Encantadas o le aventure nel mare delle meraviglie* (2014-15). In doing so, he proposes a systematisation within which the examples are located in contexts of "particular traditions and aesthetic discourses."

From an artistic perspective, composer **Hauke Berheide** and writer-director **Amy Stebbins** open their contribution with a critical examination of the relationship between 'Repertoirebetrieb', audience, and contemporary opera (with side glances towards the opera landscape in the USA). With their aesthetic

concept of ‘ambivalent engagement’, they take position in this constellation by using their opera *Mauerschau*, which premiered in 2016, as an example. They emphasise the intermedial constitution of opera as a potential for creating e.g. narrative conventions and meaning by means of traditional forms such as the aria, whilst still taking into account the fragmented constitution of the present.

Challenged by music-theatrical phenomena or settings in the broadest sense, three contributions seek transdisciplinary approaches to their subjects:

In his text, theatre scholar **David Roesner** offers an extension of (music)theatre performance analysis that could serve as a superstructure to the hitherto prevailing approaches of phenomenology and semiotics, which run complementarily side by side. His approach refers to Karl Weick's theory of sensemaking, which originates from organisational sociology. Here, the perceiving subject is at the center, allowing for the incorporation of one's own experiential horizon as well as for the self-reflection on one's role as a researching person participating in the performance. Roesner unfolds the main points of his adaptation using a case study, a performance of Mathis Nitschke's production *Maya* (2017), which cannot be clearly assigned to any genre.

Theatre scholar, musician, and composer **Rasmus Nordholt-Frieling** proposes “musicality” as a philosophical term drawing on thinkers such as Gilbert Simondon, Jean-Luc Nancy, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. He proposes using “musicality” as a descriptive category of scenic, sonic, but also extra-musical assemblages. He illustrates a “thinking in structures”, derived from music with the concept of modulation and on the basis of his own work on the synthesizer. Nordholt-Frieling then takes a look at music theatre constellations such as Arnold Schönberg's *Die glückliche Hand* and Heiner Goebbels' *Stifters Dinge*.

The contribution by scholar and composer **James Maher** is dedicated to works that are located at the interface of performance, ritual and composition and that have therefore so far largely fallen through the analytical cracks of music theatre studies. Maher critically rethinks Anthony Sheppard's concept of “ritualized music theatre”. Two case studies – the *Sonic Meditations* (1974) by Pauline Oliveros and the *Super Critical Mass Project* by Julian Day, which has been developed continuously since 2007 – are used to introduce the term “ritualized sonic performance” in order to systematically describe this kind of music theatre. These examples illustrate essential features of RSM, such as the relationship between audience and performers or formalisms.

Three further essays focus on individual case studies and thus demonstrate not only the pluralism of current aesthetics and scenic forms, but also a variety of possible approaches and questions:

In their contribution, musicologists and composers **Litha Efthymiou** and **Martin Scheuregger** deal with questions of spatiality and audience. They

develop their theory of “experiential embodied music theatre”, using their own work *I only know I am* as a case study. In doing so, they approach their subject from several sides and question it from both a production perspective by establishing connections to immersive and site-specific forms of theatre as well as from a phenomenologically influenced perspective, incorporating theories of audience engagement and embodiment.

Musicologist **Jane Forner** devotes her essay to Peter Eötvös’ opera *Paradise Reloaded (Lilith)*, which she examines in terms of its links between the mythical past and contemporary political issues. She not only examines text and material sources, but also discusses the parodic potential against the background of operatic grotesqueness in the 20th century. By further including three productions (Vienna 2013, Chemnitz 2015 and Bielefeld 2020), Forner shows how the Lilith myth can be read beyond a feminist claim as a utopia for the 21st century.

Musicologist **Carmen Noheda** chooses *La ciudad de las mentiras* by Elena Mendoza and Matthias Rebstock as an example – a commissioned work that premiered in 2017 at the Teatro Real in Madrid, where it was also the first world premiere that explicitly sees itself not as an opera but as ‘music theatre’. Noheda’s text explores this field of tension between ‘opera’ as a genre and institution and this particular work and its production. The theoretical background for this is the concept of ‘Composed Theatre’, which the librettist Rebstock developed together with David Roesner in 2012.

The contributions in *ACT 10* question, among other things: descriptive categories (Drees, Maher), aesthetic potentials (Efthymiou/Scheuregger, Berheide/Stebbins), the role of the audience (Roesner, Berheide/Stebbins), political dimensions (Berheide/Stebbins, Forner), and philosophical or sociological concepts (Nordholt-Frieling, Roesner). They discuss methodological approaches to ritual-like compositional structures (Maher), mythological relectures (Forner), music as a concept beyond sound and acoustics (Nordholt-Frieling) as well as analyses of performative formats (Roesner). Among the case studies some were developed in collaborative processes (Noheda, Efthymiou/Scheuregger), they negotiate the institutional question of opera and music theatre (Drees, Berheide/Stebbins, Noheda), and some originate from the authors’ own pen and are here explored from a critical distance (Berheide/Stebbins, Efthymiou/Scheuregger). In this way, the issue aims to make a contribution to current discourses, methods and aesthetic objects of opera studies and music theatre studies as well as to open up the space for further discussions.

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