

## 4 Munich Biennale for New Music Theater

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### 4.1 Introduction

The Munich Biennale for New Music Theater (German: *Münchener Biennale für Neues Musiktheater*) is a festival for experimental music theatre performances that takes in and around the Gasteig and Muffatwerk cultural complexes, as well in other theatres and venues in the city of Munich. It was founded in 1988 by the composer Hans Werner Henze (\*1926–†2012), and taken over by Peter Ruzicka (\*1948) in 1996. He would continue to lead the biennale until 2014, with the current directors Daniel Ott (\*1960) and Manos Tsangaris (\*1956) taking over as of the 2016 edition.

The focus of this chapter will be on the current biennale leadership and their approach to running the festival, with particular attention placed on the relationship between their processes of commissioning and the music theatre productions that the biennale produces. In the interest of contextualizing the festival within a historical perspective, this chapter will also examine key features and characteristics of the earlier two directors and their approaches to the festival.

The historical context of the biennale begins by examining the compositional style of its founder, Hans Werner Henze. Known already for his music theatre works, the founding director of the biennale would create the festival as a place to foster new music theatre works among a younger generation of composers who he saw as moving away from the genre, as well as present new music theatre works to the Munich public. The biennale during this era would program a range of different approaches to music theatre, including puppet theatre, with its programmatic focus on linear, dramatic, narrative-based librettos. The composers' task during this time was clearly delineated within the theatrical apparatus, producing a score to be performed, and overseeing the realization of the work.

As Peter Ruzicka took over the festival as of 1996, the festival's focus would gradually shift towards a more post-dramatic style. This meant not just non-linear, fragmentary librettos, but also an acknowledgement that the libretto was only one aspect in the constitution of the performance, meaning that music was no longer understood as subservient to the drama, but rather able to deliver its own sense.

This turn in the biennale's programming fit with Ruzicka's own post-modern compositional practice, itself focused on a fragmentary aesthetic.

Unifying the two first directors is a persistent belief in both the operatic and Western classical music traditions, as well as in the opera stage as the main place that further works in that tradition should be performed. Both understood the commissions they would organize as in different ways fitting into and continuing this tradition. While for Henze, it was an interest in promoting the accessibility of music theatre for the audience as a contrast to the Darmstadt school, for Ruzicka the focus lay more on updating the Western musical tradition with both works and a musical language adapted to the demands and challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The change to Daniel Ott and Manos Tsangaris (abbreviated "DOMTS") as co-directors of the festival brought an approach to music theatre that was more influenced by a rejection of operatic trappings in favour of an emphasis on the spontaneity of the moment of performance. This style can be traced to the compositional practice of the duo's teachers, Nicolaus A. Huber and Mauricio Kagel respectively, who both had been influenced by the performative turn in the arts in the 1950s and 1960s.

Daniel Ott's own compositional work employs scores, though these work more as collectively-decided documents that coordinate large-scale music theatre projects with a variety of diverse actors. Ott's practice is more about moulding and shaping pre-existing materials and skills, shaping them into a collective musical expression. Manos Tsangaris conversely works often on a smaller scale, using notation as a way of coordinating the entries and exists, ons and offs, of all manner of musical and non-musical material. More than music works, he creates immersive situations that play with the audience's perception and sense of expectation.

For both composers, their works often centre on the designing of a somewhat unpredictable system or situation then letting it all play out in the performance. They take a similar approach to the biennale, and in doing so come up with an unorthodox way of programming its productions. The majority of productions for both the 2016 and 2018 biennales have been the result of a series of what DOMTS call "Biennale Platforms." These are workshops set up by the biennale where commissions are developed collectively by groups consisting of composers, but also musicians, stage designers, visual artists, etc., all working as a team. This has been part of a strategy of reconnecting the biennale to its original goals of supporting younger composers as well as creating a strong and significant festival experience for the audience.

What both the results of the biennale platforms and the rest of DOMTS' commissions for the biennale have in common is the emphasis they place on experimenting with the presentation format of music theatre works: From music theatre as installation to performances for a single audience member in a bathtub, pro-

ductions share a heterogeneity and novelty of approach. They are in turn the result of DOMTS' wanting to present as wide as possible a variety of music theatre approaches in the biennale as possible. As with the unpredictability of their own performances, these capricious forms of music theatre are not a scattershot hoping to find the next big thing, but rather are symptomatic of a shift to productions whose form of presentation is intended to be an extension of the artistic expression of its organizers.

It will be argued that DOMTS have placed their focus on the development and commissioning of individual productions for the biennale, rather than on the precise "composition" of commissions during the time of the festival. The tendency to compose situations out of heterogeneous elements visible in both composers' individual artistic practice seems to have been applied to the development of works, with the end results of this experimentation being presented at the festival. What this represents is an unusual and interesting shift for DOMTS towards festival administration using the know-how of their respective artistic practices, argued to be a form of music curatorial approach to the festival.

While in the older biennales led by Henze and Ruzicka, commissioning and assembling the programme occurred largely along established lines, DOMTS make the process of commissioning into their main form of artistic expression as leaders. Rather than produce compositions, they choose artists.<sup>1</sup> In order to understand the connotations of this hybrid form of practice between management and artistic creation, comparisons are drawn to the curatorial discourse in order to reveal some of the implications of this shift in their artistic practices. The investigation in the previous chapter on curating in the field of theatre will also prove useful, as the translation of curatorial practice into theatre practiced by Florian Malzacher and others can serve as a useful model for understanding curatorial practice beyond its basic understanding as concert dramaturgy in the field of music theatre.

## 4.2 Hans Werner Henze

### 4.2.1 Henze's Compositional Practice

Hans Werner Henze would position his compositional style consistently within the "grand" European tradition (Petersen 2012, 2). As he would describe his stylistic approach, he still saw many possibilities left in "the path from Wagner to Schoenberg," something that can be clearly heard in his music as well. Despite the influence of the Darmstadt school, and his adaptation of dodecaphonic technique, and while

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1 Claire Bishop notably formulates a similar idea while discussing relational aesthetics and changes in curatorial practices in the 1990s (Bishop 2014a, 244).