

# 1 Introduction

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## 1.1 Establishing the Field

This book is an attempt to establish a theoretical basis for curatorial practice in the field of contemporary classical music (CCM).<sup>1</sup> As organizers and artists alike are experimenting with new forms of mediating and presenting musical work, CCM's relation to its audiences is becoming a key area of concern both for scholars and for practitioners. There thus exists an urgency for reflecting on these approaches from a scholarly perspective informed by practice, one that can reflect on the interrelationships between forms of music's administration, mediation, and performance. In order to do this, this work will lay out a new way of understanding the mediation of contemporary musical practice, one that is both informed by curatorial practices in neighbouring artistic disciplines, but also developed out of the unique and specific challenges that exist in relation to such practices in CCM.

Central to this project will be the argument that music curatorial practice is not synonymous with interdisciplinary concert dramaturgy: composing concerts, integrating sound installations, performances that feature visual elements, or “expanding” the definition of musical material does not necessarily mean success in achieving social relevance, or creating new paradigms of musical production, rather, such initiatives often represent remixes or superficial changes to a robust underlying ideology. In contrast, music curatorial methodologies should be understood as symptomatic of a new and different kind of approach to musical leadership, one with an increased attention to the effect of mediation and contextualization on the perception of musical practice.

A variety of relevant sources drawn from curatorial studies in both the visual arts, and in the performing arts of dance and theatre, will allow for connections to concepts and ideas about the mediation of art from a broader array of practitioners. In this way, curatorial practice in music is not the “importation” of something from

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1 Throughout this work, the term the term “contemporary classical music” (abbreviated CCM) will be referred to when discussing the field in general, while the term “New Music” will be used when discussing specifically the German context, where the relationship to *Neue Musik* is an important historical reference.

a foreign discipline, but rather constitutes specific kind of approach to thinking about mediation, one that is informed by music history, but also takes advantage of an abundance of interesting practices and ideas also from other disciplines. These examples and arguments are used in order to enrich discussion of the mediation of CCM festivals, and to provide additional perspectives on how to interpret the formats being analyzed.

Curatorial practices in music are thus argued to be ones that understand the setting of a specific frame for a musical event as itself an expressive and often critical act. In developing a framework for examining such practices, which this volume attempts in the first two chapters, the goal is to create more nuanced understandings of music curatorial practice that will in turn spur and inform future music curatorial initiatives.

Although important developments are occurring in many different kinds of musical institutions, the focus of this work is specifically on the leadership of festivals, in particular focusing on two complementary case studies of curatorial practice in CCM. While it is not just festivals that are beginning to engage with these challenges—important developments are happening also in the programming of concert series and seasons, in the leadership of permanent cultural institutions, and in education—both their central role in the sustaining of European musical life, and their being the site of several significant attempts at addressing these issues make them an ideal starting point for investigating the mediation of musical practice.

Even just focusing on Germany, a short survey of some of its best-known festivals reveals how many of them are currently undergoing fundamental changes that can be viewed through the lens of a curatorial perspective. For instance, its oldest festival for New Music, and one of few entirely for new commissions, the Donaueschinger Musiktage has over many editions now tried to reflect on how forms of musical presentation must be updated for a changing society.<sup>2</sup> The Darmstadt Summer Course, which despite ostensibly being a summer school is also a major “festival” in its own sense, has also been embracing change, creating so-called “open spaces” as of 2010 that give a platform for participants in the course to self-organize and show their work, and is expanding the (sub)genres of musical programming it offers. The Wittener Tage für neue Kammermusik, another important commissioning festival, has been attempting new approaches and concert formats, such as music theatre. The ECLAT festival in Stuttgart has also been embracing music theatre, performance installations, and concerts that address their multi-media dimensions. The Munich Biennale for New Music Theater, which will be studied here, has been creating idiosyncratic new forms of music theatre that are experimenting with the limits of the genre. The Maerzmusik festival, another

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2 On the festival in Donaueschingen, see Köhler 2006, 87–93.

case study, has been engaging in deep theoretical reflection about its role and the composers it programs. A view just over Germany's borders reveals similarly large-scale and important festivals experimenting with their formats, such as Oslo's Ultima festival, Vienna's Wien Modern, the Festival Rümelingen near Basel, or Archipel in Geneva, to name just a few examples close at hand.

While certainly worthwhile, a detailed study of all major German New Music festivals would be beyond the scope of the current volume. Instead, the focus will be on two case studies, the Munich Biennale for New Music Theater (Chapter 4), and the annual Maerzmusik Festival at the Berliner Festspiele (Chapter 5), each of which for its own unique reasons can be considered as exemplarily of certain changes and challenges that are currently occurring in this field. While both are also examined historically, the primary concern here is with some of their most recent editions: the 2016 and 2018 editions of the Munich Biennale, as well as the 2017 and 2018 editions of Maerzmusik.<sup>3</sup> These festivals are argued to exhibit important symptoms of a new kind of leadership of music festivals, one that closely combines administrative and artistic considerations together into what will be argued to be a curatorial practice.

A study of the more august Donaueschinger Musiktage and Darmstadt Summer Course was decided against. This is because the two case studies that have been chosen here are argued to exhibit under their current leadership unique and exemplary forms of musical mediation not seem to the same extent at the two other festivals. This in turn makes them more significant case studies than their two better-known counterparts.

Examining the Munich Biennale for New Music Theater in Chapter 4 allows for the opportunity to explore New Music's relation to music theatre in depth. The focus in this chapter lies on an examination of the relationship between the artistic practices of both Daniel Ott and Manos Tsangaris, the current co-directors, and in particular the platforms that they have run in the lead up to their two biennales so far. Both composers' focus on the composition of heterogeneous elements in their compositional practices, a trait that appears again in how they constitute the conditions of production for biennale compositions, establishes an integration of their artistic and administrative practices that is mirrored in their approach to the biennale. This is argued to relate to curatorial practice in its blending of organizational and creative aspects, and resembles the skillset required for the contemporary knowledge worker. By in turn encouraging young practitioners to take charge of the mediation of their works as an extension of their artistic practice, they mirror

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3 For both the Munich Biennale for New Music Theater, as well as the Maerzmusik festival at the Berliner Festspiele, the festivals were examined both historically since their founding, and through first-person methods (with the author visiting the festival editions that are discussed in-depth in this volume).

the transformation of their own artistic practices into curatorial ones. This creates a kind of nesting-doll situation that allows for an examination of both new educational practices (and their challenges) in music theatre, as well as the manner in which their commissioned productions are mediated to the festival public.

The book then complements the focus on music theatre by examining the Maerzmusik festival and its processes of commissioning that puts emphasis on the experience of the festival event itself as the objective of the curatorial practice of the festival curator, Berno Odo Polzer. The selection of individual works, and the specific ways in which they are programmed, presented, and combined in various formats are understood as a form of artistic expression by the director, achieved through the careful composition of festival concerts. These concerts weave CCM together with related artistic presentations into situated combinations that function through thematic or formal similarity.

Developing out of this, Polzer's music curatorial approach is focused on the specific "composition" and *mise en scène* of musical and other works in order to investigate various concepts and ideas related to music, its history, and its relationship to issues of time and perception. As Polzer's position as artistic director of this festival concentrates definitional power in one individual, the festival becomes a realization of his vision. This relationship between artistic director and the works he programs has been readily established in curatorial discourse. Using the history of exhibition-making as a guide, this approach is forecast to come into tension with musical practitioners taking charge of their own processes of mediation, as explored with the Munich Biennale.<sup>4</sup> While this contradiction exists between emancipated values at the centre of the festival and the establishment of the curator at its authorial centre, the festival is nevertheless regarded as a successful instance of using musical means to create a festival that explicitly positions itself towards major societal debates such as decolonization, gender issues, ecological crises, capitalism and neoliberalism, etc.

In examining these two case studies, it is argued that they are touching on and beginning to experiment with curatorial concepts, however that there still remains avenues of improvement when it comes to the realization of music curatorial

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4 Throughout this volume, the term "musical practitioner" will be used to refer to a person who is participating somehow in the act of music-making. This term is used because of its ambiguity as to the exact nature of the role being played, and allows for description of musical performance without assigning discrete, pre-codified roles at the same time. This is particularly relevant in those cases where established roles and responsibilities in the music-making process are being subverted, or new combinations of responsibilities are being formed. These new forms are then allowed to emerge through their description rather than through recourse to reified categories. Its ambiguity also allows for an openness to exist in regards to the disciplinary or genre affiliation of the music maker—allowing also this to be something defined in the situated event of performance.

practices. Through the close examination of these two exemplary cases, as well as through the laying of a theoretical groundwork for music-curatorial thinking, this volume begins to span the gap between artistic and administrative practices in CCM and those of the larger performing arts field.

## 1.2 The State of the Art

### 1.2.1 Scholarly Literature

While several fields touch on issues also related to curating in music, a significant scholarly treatment of the subject has yet to be found. While some prominent scholarly projects relate to the intermixing of artistic and organizational considerations in musical practice, this project will be argued to differ from earlier research in significant ways.

A first position in this area is Martin Tröndle, with his scholarly project to establish a theory of the concert as a basis for the field of *concert studies*. This approach has been outlined by Tröndle across two edited compilations, *Das Konzert* (2011) and *Das Konzert II* (2018). He is clear throughout both his texts and the articles collected in his compilations that the object of his research is the concert for classical music in both its historical development, and as it exists today, a field that he claims has received very little academic treatment historically, which also supports the position maintained here (2018, 25). While his chief concern is the classical music concert, and thus slightly different to this project, it nevertheless takes a similar perspective on contemporary musical practice, examining the constitution of its frame.

Tröndle argues that the classical concert as it exists today, with its separation of the participants in a concert event into a collective of silent, passive listeners and active musicians, is no longer relevant for a society where individuality is highly prized (Tröndle 2018, 42). In other words, the classical concert format is no longer adapted to the contemporary public, and must evolve to suit their interests. As a remedy to this problem, Tröndle suggests a broad program of experimentation with the various elements of the concert situation, all with the goal of finding various new ways of presentation that will catch the attention of a contemporary public.<sup>5</sup>

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5 As Patrick Hahn suggests, the metric of success that Tröndle uses in this part of his argument quickly reveals itself to be the market. His essay also supports the criticism that Tröndle defines his project extremely narrowly in terms of the traditional classical concert as it has persisted over time (see Hahn 2018, 18–19).