

# Varieties of Independent Music Theatre in Europe<sup>1</sup>

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Hans-Jörg Kapp begins his essay on independent music theatre in German-speaking Europe with the following sentence: ‘It exists, the “independent music theatre scene”’.<sup>2</sup> It is typical for this type of theatre that one would feel the need to point out its very existence. With an eye towards independent music theatre in Germany, I too have argued that there is certainly a vibrant scene, although – unlike independent dance theatre, for example – it is not yet really present to the general public.<sup>3</sup> Its manifestations seem too heterogeneous to enjoy recognition as a cohesive whole, and they often vanish into the expansive categories of an interdisciplinary or multimedia theatre that, as an effect of the traction gained by postdramatic and boundary-crossing works, already deals with all possible materials and media, music being one of them.

What holds true for German-speaking Europe applies to Europe in general: independent music theatre has heretofore not managed to emancipate and establish itself to the same degree as independent dramatic theatre and dance theatre, neither in terms of scholarly discourse nor in the public eye. To name some circumstances amongst many which evince this fact, few extensive studies on the topic have emerged, no empirical inquiries into protagonists working in the field or into audience structures can be said to exist, hardly any activity on the part of international associations and organisations takes place, and if it does, it occurs only in particular areas within this vast field.

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**1** | In the German original the term ‘Freies Musiktheater’ is used throughout the text. To the different meanings of ‚independent music theatre‘ and ‘Freies Musiktheater’ see 1.2.

**2** | Hans-Jörg Kapp, ‘Vom Bestellen lokaler Klangfelder: Freies Musiktheater im deutschsprachigen Raum’, in: Eckhard Mittelstädt and Alexander Pinto (eds.), *Die Freien Darstellenden Künste in Deutschland*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2013, pp. 183–194.

**3** | Matthias Rebstock, ‘Musiktheater: Spielräume schaffen!’, in: Wolfgang Schneider, *Theater entwickeln und planen*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2013, pp. 299–314.

Before anything else, independent music theatre must be made accessible as a cohesive field of study.<sup>4</sup>

Against this backdrop, it should only seem logical that the publication before you afford independent music theatre only a side note rather than a full-length study. Correspondingly, my essay concentrates on formulating perspectives for future research projects that would have to devote more thorough and systematic attention to discrete international, national and regional traditions, to culture-political conditions as well as to protagonists, practices and aesthetics. Such an endeavour would be extremely worthwhile, since independent music theatre bears enormous potential for artistic innovation. In this respect, Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi even consider music theatre 'the most central performance art form of the post-modern world'.<sup>5</sup>

I like most of the other authors who occupy themselves with the independent performing arts, operate with the fundamental assumption that a correlation between structures, working processes and aesthetics exists, and that the innovative potential of independent music theatre should be sought within this interrelationship. A thorough study would therefore have to take this cir-

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**4** | To be sure, there are numerous papers on individual artistic positions. Amongst those which stem from musicology, one observes the preponderance of a work-oriented perspective: the investigation is geared mainly to compositions, or rather scores, and thereby to the segment of the field known as new music theatre, or else new opera (see 1.3). Both the performance as a totality in terms of its music-theatrical form as well as aspects concerned with the processes, production conditions or structural frameworks are usually excluded. Although these topics are indeed addressed by Theatre Studies, independent music theatre receives only marginal attention from it. A Music Theatre Studies would have to achieve a balancing act here. The following are important works that at least partially take this field into account:

Matthias Rebstock and David Roesner (eds.), *Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices, Processes*, Bristol: Intellect Ltd., 2012; Jörn Peter Hiekel (ed.), *Neue Musik in Bewegung: Musik- und Tanztheater heute*, Mainz: Schott, 2011; Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi (eds.), *The New Music Theater*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; Frieder Reininghaus and Katja Schneider (eds.), 'Experimentelles Musik- und Tanztheater', Vol. 7 of *Handbuch der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert*, Laaber: Laaber, 2004; Siegfried Mauser, *Musiktheater im 20. Jahrhundert*, Vol. 14 of *Handbuch der musikalischen Gattungen*, Laaber: Laaber, 2002.

A noteworthy example is the anthology of interviews *Fragen an das Musiktheater*, edited by Jury Everhartz and Kristine Tornquist (Vienna: edition atelier, 2012) in which fourteen independent music theatre ensembles talk about their work, providing for the first time a bundled perspective on the separate activities of Viennese ensembles and thereby constituting what one could call the Viennese music theatre scene.

**5** | Salzman/Desi, *The New Music Theater*, cover blurb.

cumstance into account. For what follows, however, I will take a more narrow approach and will concentrate on diverse artistic practices (i.e., on working processes and different fields of artistic engagement that seem to characterise independent music theatre's innovative potential). Societal and culture-political frameworks in individual countries, funding systems and the highly diverse historical traditions can only be touched upon.

If I accent the innovative potential of independent music theatre in the following, I do so in an attempt to pose a double differentiation: the established international opera *métier* constitutes one frame of reference. Yet discursive use of the term 'opera' usually involves two entirely disparate aspects – on the one hand, 'opera' signifies a certain structure, especially the financing and working modes proper to public opera houses, on the other hand it also signifies a certain repertoire of pieces: that maximum of fifty – or in many countries fewer – operas which define season schedules, being limited for the most part to operas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> My study therefore attempts to pursue the potential that arises when one takes a position beyond this concept of opera. The occurrence of contemporary innovations and the unleashing of new potentials within the established structure of opera, with regard to both modi operandi and the pieces performed, should in no way be denied; these innovations and potentials simply do not enter into the subject matter of this text, since they do not fall under the concept of independent music theatre. They merited scrutiny by another study.

Independent theatre provides a second frame of reference. Were one to conform to the conventional division of the performing arts into text-based dramatic theatre, music theatre and dance theatre, then independent text-based dramatic theatre would be meant here. Yet since independent theatre has, in the course of the postdramatic theatre, bid farewell to the idea of a traditional text-based dramatic theatre, I shall speak only of 'independent theatre' in the following. Many of the issues related to independent music theatre, as well as analyses undertaken more deliberately below, characterise independent theatre in general; typically, they manifest in music theatre with a certain temporal delay, whether one is referring to artistic engagement with new spaces or new formats, or to reflection on one's own artistic working conditions. Hence, my central question reads as follows: how do these issues and topics in independent music theatre set themselves apart from those in independent theatre, and to what extent does the privileging of music give rise to a more specific set of factors?

<sup>6</sup> | Cf. Arnold Jakobshagen, 'Musiktheater', [www.miz.org/static\\_de/themenportale/einfuehrungstexte\\_pdf/03\\_KonzerteMusiktheater/jacobshagen.pdf](http://www.miz.org/static_de/themenportale/einfuehrungstexte_pdf/03_KonzerteMusiktheater/jacobshagen.pdf) (last accessed 24.3.2015).

The range of projects and protagonists discussed in detail below cannot be considered a representative selection. It simply follows from the information and materials I have available as well as the knowledge and experiences I have gathered as a director and scholar in this field. A more systematic research in the whole field of independent music theatre in Europe would yet need to be done. The selection, however, is characteristic in the sense that it contains relevant positions in the contexts of the issues or fields of innovation discussed below.

My perspective has essentially been shaped by German-speaking countries, departing from there into international spheres. This perspective's indisputably subjective orientation comes to light in the following for example through my exclusion of Eastern-European regions.<sup>7</sup> In order to get a truly European perspective which could do justice to specific contexts and agents in individual countries from my point of view it would be necessary to include the participation of international researchers.

My own research was accompanied by a research seminar I conducted during the 2013 summer semester at the University of Hildesheim. During this seminar, the participating students and I developed a questionnaire which acted as a basis for holding and evaluating interviews with representatives from various ensembles. The findings gathered from these interviews constitute a vital source drawn upon by the following report.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, the target of this report is to develop approaches for ways one could map the field of independent music theatre in Europe. Depending on which point of view one inhabits while interrogating this field, particular phenomena come to the foreground and others slide to the background. In the first main section, I will attend to the concept of independent music theatre; after that, I will turn my attention towards lines of tradition (genres), and finally towards agents and structures one meets in this field. The second main section revolves around artistic practices, their characteristic strategies and questions as well as their innovative potential.

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**7** | The relatively high number of Berlin-based ensembles and projects whose voices are heard in this investigation is less a result of the subjectivity of my position than a by-product of the fact that Berlin together with Vienna and the scene in the Netherlands and Flanders is one of the centres of independent music theatre in Europe.

**8** | My gratitude goes to my students Hannah Ehlers, Mariya Kashyna, Sina Leuenhagen, Mireia Ludwig, Carola Michaelis, Gregor Pellacini, Hans Peters, Ines Schmitt, Johanna Seyffert, Patrick Walter and Edgar Wendt.

## 1. TERMS AND STRUCTURES

### 1.1 What Does 'Music Theatre' Mean?

The difficulty of examining independent music theatre in Europe already begins with the term itself, or more specifically, with the different meanings the term has in different languages and countries. For instance, the terms 'Musiktheater', 'music theatre' and 'théâtre musical' don't really mean the same. Their attendant terminologies have varying histories, are integrated in different ways into the lexical fields of their respective languages and are linked to different conceptions. One can, however, discern two distinct meanings that determine the international discourse:

1. 'Music theatre' serves as an umbrella term for all forms of theatre for which music plays constitutive role. Those genres which fall under this term include opera, operetta and the musical,<sup>9</sup> in addition to a spectrum of diverse genres like new music theatre, experimental music theatre, instrumental theatre, staged concerts, concert installations, musical performance and so forth.<sup>10</sup>

This term's outer edges are necessarily blurry and overlap with other terms and their respective fields. Furthermore, such a determination of the term 'music theatre' according to the sum of differing genres is limited when dealing with musicalized forms of theatre, such as in the work of Einar Schleef, Robert Wilson, Jan Fabre or Christoph Marthaler.<sup>11</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann ascribes a fundamental musicalisation to the forms of theatre he gathers under the term 'postdramatic'. Yet as evidence of such a musicalisation, he cites works by Heiner Goebbels, Meredith Monk and others – prominent examples from the field of *music theatre*. Thus, the relation between the terms 'postdramatic theatre' and 'music theatre' remains unclear at first.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> | Jacobshagen even describes dance as a music theatre genre. Cf. loc. cit.

<sup>10</sup> | Cf. also Wolfgang Ruf: 'Besides literary opera and politically engaged music theatre, several varieties of avant-garde music theatre unfolded, types for which no generic term exists, only a series of designations such as 'musical theatre' (Stockhausen, 1961); 'visible music' (Schnebel, 1966); 'visual music', 'audiovisual music', 'staged music' (Dahlhaus) or 'media composition' (H. R. Zeller).' Wolfgang Ruf, 'Musiktheater', in: Ludwig Finscher (ed.), *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Vol. 6 of *Sachteil*, Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1997, column #1705.

<sup>11</sup> | Cf. David Roesner, *Musicality in Theatre*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014; and idem., *Theater als Musik. Verfahren der Musikalisierung in chorischen Theaterformen bei Christoph Marthaler, Einar Schleef und Robert Wilson*, Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> | For more on this topic, see 1.3. Instead of a definition or terminology for the sum of varying genres, a systematic way of accessing the term presents itself: accordingly,

Yet it can already be grasped here that 'music theatre' should not be understood as a fixed category. The undermining of established terminological boundaries, categories and genres belongs to the most characteristic features of the arts since the beginning of the twentieth century. Their real métier is the in-between: that which evades unambiguous ascription. Hence, 'music theatre' sometimes becomes more of a perspective from which one can glimpse phenomena. These phenomena, when observed from this perspective, display features which would elude scrutiny were one to observe them using another terminology. Therefore, in my view, a discussion concerning whether for example Christoph Marthaler's works are or are not music theatre is less fruitful than a discussion which concerns what one learns about the works *when* regarded as music theatre – and what reasons there are for doing so. Similar thinking would apply to works by Xavier Le Roy or Sasha Waltz. With good reason, they too would be viewable as music theatre *and* as dance theatre, each moniker allowing the uncovering of other aspects and the referencing of other discourses.

2. Aside from its broader sense, the term 'music theatre' is often used in a narrower sense, namely as a term which poses a contrast to 'opera'. It is important to see that *this* concept of music theatre is not a pure genre designation, but instead goes along with an aesthetic claim (at least in the context of the German state and municipal theatre system): 'music theatre' claims to be more progressive, flexible and up to date than 'opera', the latter still being considered stodgy and aesthetically retrograde.<sup>13</sup> Equally typical of this contrasting of 'opera' to 'music theatre' is an intermingling of aesthetic and institutional aspects. For instance, 'opera' is associated as much with the plot carrying role of the singing parts as with the large orchestra apparatus (referring to the piece's personnel and at the same time to the structure upheld by an institution) and the publicly funded opera house itself; contrariwise, 'music theatre' stands for a smaller form, for the more flexible apparatus and for the giving of equal importance to all the employed theatrical means, which can even lead to the complete absence of singing in music theatre as, for example, in many pieces by John Cage or

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music theatre would be that form of theatre for which music plays a constitutive role as concerns the production of sense or structure, or where music possesses a dimension relevant to the work's action (*Handlung* meaning 'action' and 'plot'). For more on the concept of action-relevance (*Handlungsrelevanz*), cf. Christiane Plank-Baldauf, 'Erzählen mit Musik – Erzählte Musik', in: *Das Magazin* no. 5, Oldenburg: Oldenburgisches Staatstheater, 2012/13. In practice, however, such a definition encounters its own limits.

**13** | The innovative tone exuded over a long period of time by the expression 'music theatre' has admittedly faded to a large extent. Cf. also H.-J. Kapp, 'Vom Bestellen lokaler Klangfelder', p. 184.

Mauricio Kagel. Viewed through an historical lens, this meaning of ‘music theatre’ draws on decisive impulses from 1960s music theatre, which, as part of a shifting terminology, is defined as ‘new’ or ‘experimental music theatre’, or ‘instrumental theatre’ (for more on this, see 1.3).

However, within the field of pocket opera companies – which do not espouse this radical turn away from the opera, electing instead to adhere to the traditional features of the opera-genre – one can also discern an oppositional position vis-à-vis the traditional opera-institution. Free pocket operas distinguish themselves from the big apparatus and from the restricted programmes of a standardised repertoire, and favour another model for staging works – one characterised by closer cooperation between conductors and directors, for example.

Further differences exist beyond these two fundamentally divergent meanings of ‘music theatre’ depending on the theatre traditions in respective language regions and pointing to different lines of theatre-historical development.

In the German-speaking part of Europe, for example, a third usage of the term ‘Musiktheater’ exists that is charged with another aesthetic claim. It opposes ‘Musiktheater’ to ‘Oper’ and again implies institutional aspects. When used in this way, ‘Musiktheater’ stands for the aspiration to create sophisticated and challenging, contemporary theatre. Walter Felsenstein, founder and chief director of Berlin’s Komische Oper after World War II, was instrumental in shaping this understanding of ‘Musiktheater’. This meaning of the term conveys a specific image of opera staging that lays the typical heirloom gestures of the singer to rest and strives to be taken seriously as theatre. So today, also a number of opera houses such as the Komische Oper Berlin define themselves as ‘Musiktheater’.

In the English-speaking world, the term ‘music theatre’ is far less established than in German-speaking countries and is associated more strongly with musicals: ‘Ambitious modern musicals with a pretence to do more than merely entertain are as likely to be designated “music theatre” as anything else.’<sup>14</sup> The tradition of musicals is, in fact, much more sturdy in Great Britain than anywhere else in Europe, which goes not only for Broadway musicals but also for the tradition of sparsely cast, aesthetically advanced musicals. In contrast, the field of the musical in German-speaking Europe, for instance, is left primarily to large commercial productions. For the German discourse about ‘Musiktheater’ the musical plays a subordinate role.<sup>15</sup>

**14** | Salzman/Desi, *The New Music Theater*, p. 5.

**15** | The musically sophisticated musicals of Stephen Sondheim play a unique role in Great Britain. In Germany, the Neuköllner Oper in Berlin counts as an exception. This house has made a name for limited-size, contemporary and critical musicals, thanks in particular to the productions of Peter Lund. In Holland, the production house M Lab in Amsterdam can be named as an example of independent musical production.

In their book *The New Music Theater*, Salzman and Desi likewise distinguish the two meanings of ‘music theatre’ sketched above, defining them as ‘inclusive’ and ‘exclusive’:

‘The inclusive meaning of the term can encompass the entire universe of performance in which music and theatre play complementary and potentially equal roles. In this sense, *opera* can be seen as a particular and historical form of music theatre [...] However, when we say *new music theatre* in this book, we use the term in a way that is almost always meant to exclude traditional *opera*, *operetta* and *musicals*.’<sup>16</sup>

According to Salzman and Desi the ‘exclusive’ meaning of ‘new music theatre’ is meant to cover the entire spectrum of forms between operas and musicals – the two excluded. It is worth noting that the inclusive meaning of ‘music theatre’ already evinces a deeper foundation in performances while the German discourse is still more focused on pieces or works. On the other hand, it seems clear that Salzman and Desi’s identification of the term ‘new music theatre’ is coined more expansively than the German-language variant ‘Neues Musiktheater’. They include, i.e., small-scale operas<sup>17</sup> while the German term ‘Neues Musiktheater’ is descriptive of a narrower field and is primarily characterised by the theatricalisation of New Music since the 1960s.

The French term ‘théâtre musical’ also knows two variant forms: a superordinate umbrella term and a genre that embraces a future-oriented approach by setting itself apart from opera. As an example, in 1980 a French Ministry of Culture commission defined the general term as follows: ‘a theatre spectacle whose dramaturgy is essentially controlled by a musical project and has meaning only in relation to it’.<sup>18</sup> In the more specific sense (in contrast to *opera*) the term underwent formation in the mid-1970s, when a number of free ‘ateliers de théâtre musical’ were founded in the wake of the ’68 movement and in opposition to the established opera houses.<sup>19</sup> Since its founding in 1976 by the composer Georges Aperghis, ATEM in Bagnolet has become the most

**16** | Salzman/Desi, *The New Music Theater*, p. 5.

**17** | Ibid., p. 4.

**18** | ‘Spectacle théâtral dont la dramaturgie est essentiellement commandée par un projet musical et n’a de sens que par rapport à celui-ci’, quoted in Daniel Durney, ‘Théâtre et Musique. France – Années 80’, in: *Les Cahiers du CREM* No. 4–5 (1987): p. 14.

**19** | E.g., l’Atelier lyrique du Rhin, founded in 1974 in Colmar; l’Atelier de Théâtre et Musique (ATEM), founded by Georges Aperghis in Bagnolet in 1976, or Péniche-Opera in Paris, 1982 (cf. D. Durney, ‘Théâtre et Musique’, p. 11).

influential 'atelier'.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to German 'Musiktheater' and English 'music theatre', the French term 'théâtre musical' is hence more narrowly defined, being bound to forms of contemporary music theatre and corresponding more to what is understood under the designations 'Neues Musiktheater' or 'new music theatre'.

## 1.2 'Frei' or 'Independent'?

When looking at the phenomena of independent music theatre in Europe from a German point of view as I do it in this article we encounter another terminological difficulty: the term 'Freies Musiktheater' carries other implications than the term 'independent music theatre' and, like the term 'Freies Theater' in general, can only be understood in the context of the theatre system of German-speaking countries and the historical situation of the 1970s. This theatre system occupies a special position in Europe, as explained by Henning Fülle:

'The German theatre-scape is unique amongst theatre-scapes worldwide. This favourite assessment amongst cultural policy makers and columnists is symptomatic of the 'German system': around 150 theatre houses with full-time and salaried artistic ensembles and continuous repertoire operations in all sectors of the performing arts, in public (municipal and state) hands. And yet another kind of uniqueness can be found in the parallel structure of 'Freies Theater' ('free theatre'), which began to take shape in the late 1970s and has since established itself so durably that its importance as well as the urgency of its funding are acknowledged favourably.'<sup>21</sup>

The impulse that spurned the development of a suchlike 'parallel structure' of a Freies Theater in the 1970s came from societal and political aims arising after the '68 movement. These aims were achievable only 'outside the institutional systems of the authoritarianist-governed temple of the educated middle class',<sup>22</sup> thus necessitating a *freeing* of the theatre from these institutions and its repositioning outside those confines. It is only in these terms – not in terms

**20** | For a thorough rendering of ATEM's work and principles, see Matthias Rebstock, "Ça devient du théâtre, mais ça vient de la musique": The Music Theatre of Georges Aperghis, in: Rebstock/Roesner, *Composed Theatre*, pp. 223–242.

**21** | Henning Fülle, 'Freies Theater – Worüber reden wir eigentlich?' [Free theatre – What are we really talking about?], November 2012, [www.festivalimpulse.de](http://www.festivalimpulse.de) (last accessed 1.6.2013).

**22** | *Ibid.*

of freedom from financial constraints or the like – that the newly emerging theatre forms were *free*.<sup>23</sup>

Music theatre played little to no role in this liberating process. Although the Fluxus movement (which initially considered itself a musical movement) and the antiauthoritarian “happenings” and actions of John Cage since the late 1950s had great influence on the theatre world, music theatre developed hardly any institutional approaches of its own. Most works of new or experimental music theatre in the 1970s were performed within structures that New Music had built, especially in the milieu surrounding radio broadcasting institutions. Initially, not many structures evolved parallel to the opera houses.<sup>24</sup> The foundation of free opera ensembles did not set in until the 1980s, gaining a further impetus in 1990s Vienna and Berlin.<sup>25</sup> As opposed to Freies Theater, the formation of a Freies Musiktheater was hence less political and less societally or socioculturally motivated; at issue instead was the performance of a repertoire

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**23** | In his book *Labor oder Fließband?: Produktionsbedingungen freier Musiktheaterprojekte an Opernhäusern* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2013), Rainer Simon offers another examination of the concept of Freies Musiktheater. In contradistinction to the remarks of Arnold Jacobshagen in his handbook *Praxis Musiktheater*, (Laaber, 2002), Simon emphasises that the freedom of Freies Musiktheater is not to be equated with a ‘pre-suppositionlessness’, as Jacobshagen would have. Without intending to further pursue Simon’s reading of Jacobshagen’s definition here, it is perfectly obvious that no form of theatre lacks presuppositions, either socially or economically. The conclusion Simon draws from this statement is problematic, however: the freedom would be only a ‘relative’ freedom regarding both municipal and state theatre as well as Freies Theater (p. 15). We are therefore to understand ‘works that are independent, that is, free, from certain conventions regarding production which traditional opera performances are based on’ (*ibid.*) as Freies Musiktheater, regardless of whether they are produced in opera houses or in the field of independent music theatre. This interpretation also recognises the existence of ‘free music theatre productions’ in state opera houses. Not only does Simon lose sight of historical relations by proposing this definition, he also ignores all the political, financial and institutional differences between public opera houses and the independent music theatre scene.

**24** | Amongst the exceptions here are the Neuköllner Oper, Berlin, which was formed in 1972 and has existed since 1977 as a registered association, and the Pocket Opera Company in Nuremberg, which was founded in 1974 by its director Peter B. Wyrsch as *opernstudio nürnberg e.V.* The Theater am Marienplatz in Krefeld was also founded in 1976.

**25** | The following ensembles were amongst those newly founded: *Zeitgenössische Oper Berlin* (1997); *a rose is*, Berlin (1997); *Wiener Taschenoper*, Vienna (refounded in 1999); *ZOON Musiktheater*, Vienna (1994); *Neues Wiener MusikTheater*, Vienna (1999); *Musikwerkstatt Wien*, Vienna (1999). Cf. also H.-J. Kapp, ‘Vom Bestellen lokaler Klangfelder’.

of pieces that was not covered by opera houses, the use of a lighter, more flexible apparatus, and themes closer to the present day and to people's lives. In keeping with this orientation, a focus lay from the outset on new pieces and premiere performances.

Freies Theater in German-speaking countries has obviously undergone constant change since these early years. Today a wide array of theatre forms fall under this heading, ranging from the lay group without funding to internationally active, decidedly professional ensembles such as She She Pop or Rimini Protokoll. This applies similarly to today's scene of Freies Musiktheater, whose spectrum ranges from productions by young collegiate artists to those for example by Heiner Goebbels with Ensemble Modern and to international festival productions that tour throughout Europe or worldwide. Whether all these forms of theatre, or music theatre, can be gathered under the collective term 'Freies Theater', or 'Freies Musiktheater', is a subject for further discussion.<sup>26</sup> It is, however, clear that the German versions of these terms are deeply informed by history and cannot be used apart from it.

In the international context, which is not typified among other ways by competition amongst these theatre systems, the term is less charged with a future-oriented outlook and can be conceived more pragmatically: in the following, therefore, 'independent music theatre' means all forms of music theatre on a professional level that are not produced in publically funded houses and that do not pursue purely commercial interests.

### 1.3 Genres and Discourses

As our discussion of the term 'music theatre' has shown, the delineation of varying genres within the field is a thorny task, and at first glance is rather unproductive for our analysis. Even so, it is typical of music theatre that the varying genres also go along with varying sites of production, channels of distribution and audience groups as well as both public and professional discussions; that is to say, they are part of varying discourses – or, to put into different words, they are affiliated with varying 'cultural systems' or 'scenes'. One of the reasons why independent music theatre does not appear as a distinct scene is that it is split amongst separate cultural systems that have little contact with one another. In light of this circumstance, a process of subdivision into distinct genres would provide us with little insight, but a subdivision into those genres' attendant discursive fields would prove quite illuminating. My

**26** | Cf. Annemarie Matzke, 'Das "Freie Theater" gibt es nicht: Formen des Produzierens im gegenwärtigen Theater', in: W. Schneider (ed.), *Theater entwickeln und planen*. See also [www.festivalimpulse.de](http://www.festivalimpulse.de) (last accessed 1.6.2013).

observation is that three such discursive fields can be distinguished and can be differentiated by reference to certain genres:<sup>27</sup>

The first field is formed by the performance of small-scale operas and musicals as well as adaptations of repertoire operas. Small-scale operas include both baroque opera, which the independent scene has endowed with crucial momentum,<sup>28</sup> and chamber operas (especially those of the early twentieth century) that are generally played rather seldom or have only been recently rediscovered.

I understand 'opera adaptation' as including productions whose self-determined task is to use a small and flexible apparatus in order to 'tell' operas, well-known ones in particular, in novel ways. This can happen through new arrangements of the music, by shifting the story to other contexts, through incorporation of other texts or music, and the like. This approach, which allows a freer treatment of the materials and compositions than was (and is) the case in opera houses, was an important catalyst in the founding of several pocket operas and still figures strongly in the profiles of many independent opera ensembles.<sup>29</sup> Despite its success amongst audiences, this approach encounters difficulties, according to my observations, in carving out its own niche within opera and theatre discourses.

The second field takes shape around new opera and new music theatre.<sup>30</sup> Even though both of these genres were, and for some still are, almost diametrically opposed to one another from historical and aesthetic standpoints, I have associated them here because they share a common discourse: that of New Music. New music theatre is situated in the tradition of the 1960s and is linked to composers like John Cage, Mauricio Kagel, Dieter Schnebel, Vinko Globokar or György Ligeti. This form of music theatre arose, in short, out of a theatricalisation, that is, a performatisation of music-making itself, and out

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**27** | This thesis would need to be verified by corresponding discursive analyses, which I am unable to perform here.

**28** | A number of ensembles specialise in both baroque operas and new operas, or in new music theatre. Examples include Muziektheater Transparant in Antwerpen or Musikwerkstatt Wien. For more on the latter, cf. Everhartz/Tornquist, *Fragen an das Musiktheater*, p. 55f. Likewise, several festivals display this contrast between Old and New Music (or Music Theatre): the Schwetzinger Festspiele, for example, or Schlossmediale Werdenberg, Switzerland, founded by Mirella Weingarten in 2012.

**29** | E.g., Neuköllner Oper, Berlin; Pocket Opera Company, Nuremberg; Berliner Kammeroper; das andere opernensemble, Munich; Totales Theater, Vienna; or Tête à Tête Opera in London.

**30** | For reasons of clarity, I use the term 'new music theatre' here as a superordinate term that includes other forms such as experimental music theatre, instrumental theatre and others. These terms cannot be sharply separated, either historically or systematically (see above).

of an expansion of the concepts of material and composition to include extra-musical, visual realms – and thus out of a position of independence from, and implicit rejection or open criticism of,<sup>31</sup> the bourgeois art form of opera.

New opera did not regain significance in German-speaking Europe until the 1980s and 90s, and did so in connection with the currents of new subjectivism, neotonality or new simplicity in New Music. Literary opera in particular flourished.<sup>32</sup> These new operas fundamentally adhered to opera's form (e.g., the plot-carrying role of singing, the separation between singers and instrumental ensemble, and the centralisation of the singer-actor).

Nowadays, the ideological debates between new opera and new music theatre can be considered a thing of the past. A straightforward categorisation seems difficult, or has become somewhat senseless, and yet specific traditions in which composers stand can still be clearly discerned. Both new opera and new music theatre experience the highest degree of public attention within the vast field of independent music theatre. This sphere has the best structures at its disposal and enjoys a relatively gleaming reputation, even in regions where music theatre is only weakly rooted. However, both forms are well integrated into the discourse surrounding New Music. Amongst their crucial distributors are festivals for New Music that focus on premiere music performances and the role of the composer. In theatre discourse, on the other hand, these forms are only marginally visible. At the same time, one cannot claim that certain venues for independent theatre never show this sort of music theatre production (e.g., Kampnagel in Hamburg or sophiensaele and HAU in Berlin). That being said, the terrain of new music theatre and new opera remains on the outskirts of independent theatre discourse, a situation which is expressed, for instance, by the meagre status accorded to it by theatre journals or Theatre Studies publications.

Finally, one can discern a third sector of music theatre, which, to be sure, is rooted less in music discourse than in theatre discourse. This category is inhabited by forms of musicalised theatre that are largely determined by directors and do not necessarily stand in any relationship with New Music. Historically, this area is positioned in the tradition of theatre practitioners and theoreticians – Appia, Meyerhold, Artaud or Moholy-Nagy – who each in their own way demanded a liberation of theatre from the dominance of the text, proclaiming

**31** | This calls to mind, for example, the scandal surrounding the 1970 premiere performance of *staatstheater* by Mauricio Kagel at the Staatsoper Hamburg.

**32** | The Munich Biennale for New Music Theatre, founded in 1988 by Hans-Werner Henze, became the most important forum for new opera. In countries where the 1950s and 60s avant-garde played no meaningful role, the evolution of new opera followed different paths. In Great Britain, for example, an unbroken tradition of such new chamber operas has existed since Benjamin Britten.

instead the organisation of theatrical elements according to the model of musical compositions (i.e., scores). It is crucial to our context that we see how the aforementioned new music theatre of the 1960s appealed to this tradition in its search for new forms of music theatre beyond opera. Hans-Thies Lehmann, in turn, sees John Cage and the Fluxus and Happening scenes Cage inspired as vital points of reference for postdramatic theatre, which he comprehends as being characterised through 'simultaneity', a 'dehierarchisation of theatrical means', and a fundamental, all-encompassing musicalisation of the material – each of which are facets pertinent to the music theatre of the 1960s.<sup>33</sup> As pointed out earlier, Lehmann's analyses rely on music theatre artists such as Heiner Goebbels, Meredith Monk or Christoph Marthaler.<sup>34</sup> Today Marthaler is succeeded by musicians/directors such as Ruedi Häusermann or David Marton. The distinctive thing about these directors is that, although they began their careers in independent theatre, today they almost exclusively work in dramatic theatre houses, working only in exceptional cases in opera houses.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, they are discussed primarily within theatre discourse.

In view of the historical and aesthetic connections existing between new music theatre and postdramatic, musicalised theatre, David Roesner and I introduced the term 'composed theatre', intending it to cast light on common characteristics of aesthetics and working processes despite these discourses' customary separation.<sup>36</sup> 'Composed theatre' is to be understood as an umbrella term for theatre forms that feature the use of compositional processes and strategies and are essentially characterised by a musical thinking. It distinguishes itself using specific practices and fundamental aesthetic convictions: by granting equal importance to the elements of text, music, action, image and their musical-compositional organisation, or by dissolving a sequential form of production (libretto, composition, staging) – par for the course in opera – and instead developing pieces and collaborative production structures in which each practice (music, text, scene) works directly towards the performance event. New concepts of the work and of authorship are linked with this approach.

The theatrical concert (or 'staged concert') has recently joined the ranks of the three fields discussed above, each of which presently belongs to a different

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**33** | Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*, p. 139ff., trans. W.W.

**34** | For the special significance of Marthaler for independent music theatre in Germany, see also H.-K. Kapp, 'Vom Bestellen lokaler Klangfelder', p. 184f.

**35** | Häusermann's *Kanon für geschlossene Gesellschaft* came out in the year 2000 at the Munich Opera, and *Randolphs Erben* in 2009 at the Stuttgart Opera; Christoph Marthaler is, however, also active as an opera director, but his importance for independent music theatre lies in his interpretations of pieces, which he has shown in houses for dramatic theatre.

**36** | Cf. Rebstock/Roesner, *Composed Theatre*.

discourse. This genre is about breaking open the traditional concert form and enabling other ways of listening through diverse forms of staging. The music clearly holds central importance and normally amounts to concert music (music that was not originally written for a theatrical context). Theatrical concerts, though, have heretofore played more of a subordinate role in discourse. Amongst practices of staging, it would have to be grouped under composed theatre, yet it more often appears in the context of new ways of presenting and communicating music (*Musikvermittlung*) and the reformation of the standard concert format.<sup>37</sup>

## 1.4 Protagonists and Structures

Important access to the field of independent music theatre can be gained by asking questions about the agents who are active in this field and the structures in which they are active: Who are the 'makers' involved in artistic production? How are they organised? Where and how are the pieces presented? What structures of production and distribution exist, and what do channels of reception or feedback into a more general music theatre discourse look like?<sup>38</sup>

### 1.4.1 Music theatre ensembles and production teams

In comparison to independent theatre, when one considers the agents engaged in the artistic production of independent music theatre, it becomes apparent that the production form of the collective plays scarcely any role here. While the collective verges on trademark status throughout the spectrum of independent theatre and amongst independent theatre's top ensembles – one need only think of Forced Entertainment, Gob Squad, She She Pop, Need Company and so forth – in independent music theatre, very few ensembles have worked in the long-term with fixed casts and equitable decision-making structures. On the one hand, this may have to do with the (historically speaking) relatively late and primarily aesthetically motivated emergence of independent music theatre, which, in terms of its original self-conception, was less sustained by an anti-bourgeois, emancipatory and anti-elitist impulse than was the case with independent theatre. In purely practical terms, on the other hand, it has to do with the fact that music theatre productions frequently demand a larger apparatus (instrumental ensembles, singers, conductors, etc.), hence ruling out the intimacy of a collective. Ultimately, however, continuously varying concepts

**37** | Cf. Martin Tröndle, (ed.), *Das Konzert: Neue Aufführungskonzepte für eine klassische Form*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2009.

**38** | As I explained at the outset, I will not go into detail regarding cultural-political frameworks and financial conditions, although these aspects would be essential to a comprehensive description of the field.

of professionalism amongst musicians and theatre-makers play a role as well: From the viewpoint of their education (and often of their self-conception), musicians are more readily considered specialists, while a certain generalism is customary in independent theatre.<sup>39</sup>

The ensemble Die Maulwerker in Berlin holds a special position in this regard. It was founded in 1977 by Dieter Schnebel but has worked since the late 1990s as an autonomous ensemble in which all artistic decisions are made collectively and all members appear on stage. The personnel has remained virtually constant over the years. In larger music theatre productions, the responsibilities of direction, stage design and costume are assumed by people within ensemble circles.<sup>40</sup> Outside of the Maulwerker, the form of the collective seems to be practiced only in smaller formations, such as the Berliner trio schindelkilliusdutschke and the ensemble Musiktheater bruit.

By contrast, independent music theatre typically features ensembles that are organised around a few central figures and that do not have permanent personnel. Within structures that operate more like networks, each group's respective director (or team of directors) has flexible recourse to a more or less stable pool of artists, depending on the project's dimensions. The leading figures are predominantly directors who work together with a team of stage and costume designers. According to each project, they work with particular composers and engage musicians or ensembles with whom they already have a long-standing working relationship. Examples of such groups are theatre cryptic with Cathy Boyd in Glasgow, Veenfabriek with Paul Koek in Leiden, or Totales Theater with Markus Kupferblum in Vienna. In some cases, these production teams also include conductors or musical directors, such as with the opera company Novoflot<sup>41</sup> or the Zeitgenössische Oper Berlin.<sup>42</sup> Even more rarely, composers belong to the team of directors. This is the case with liquid

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**39** | I cannot go deeper into this aspect here. A certain change in the self-conception of musicians has, in fact, been observable in recent years. Cf. also Falk Hübner, *Shifting identities: the musician as theatrical performer*, Amsterdam: International Theatre & Film Books, 2014.

**40** | For example, in the production *Songbooks Complete* as part of the 'visible music' series at Stadttheater Bielefeld in 2001, with direction by Christian Kesten and Henrik Kairies and scenography by Steffi Weissmann. These three ensemble members also performed in the piece.

**41** | The Berlin based company Novoflot was founded in 2002 by the director Sven Holm, the conductor Vicente Larrañaga and the performance artist and dramaturg Sebastian Bark.

**42** | Between 1997 and 2007, Zeitgenössische Oper Berlin worked under the artistic direction of Andreas Rocholl, with a stable team consisting of members Sabrina Hölzer (direction), Mirella Weingarten (scenography) and Rüdiger Bohn (musical direction).

pinguin in Saarbrücken, for example,<sup>43</sup> or with Teatr Weimar in Malmö.<sup>44</sup> Only in exceptional cases are ensembles directed by performers. Here one could name electric voice theatre with the vocalist Francis Lynch in London or Micro-Oper in Munich, founded and directed by the singer Cornelia Melián.

### 1.4.2 Composers

Substantial segments of independent music theatre are conditioned by the special role played by composers in the working process. The fields of both new opera and new music theatre can be described as 'composers' theatre': the public's attention is directed towards the compositions and composers (e.g., in premiere performances during new music festivals, for instance). It is they who are expected to yield innovative value. Existing systems of production and reception display a relatively traditional, opera-oriented notion of theatre where this is concerned – a notion which adheres to a clear separation between the work (here the composition) and the staging. Here (music) theatre is not contemplated in terms of an experiential dimension, which is not composite but rather holistic and synaesthetic, or in terms of a constitution of meaning which only emerges in the totality of the interplay of theatrical means. Instead, the supratemporally fixed score is understood as work and essence that can be interpreted one way or another.

Be that as it may, a sizeable amount of new music theatre composers take on responsibility for direction themselves, or rather comprehend the entirety of theatrical elements as the field of their composition. The very separation of composition and staging just mentioned above is subverted by such methods. Counted amongst practitioners who deploy this type of understanding are Heiner Goebbels, Georges Aperghis, Manos Tsangaris, Daniel Ott,<sup>45</sup> Michel van der Aa, Julian Klein, Leo Dick, Jennifer Walsh, François Sarhan or Simon Sten-Andersen. One could also name the aforementioned music theatre collectives, as well as a number of teams who have developed forms of cooperative work,

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**43** | Katharina Bihler (direction) and Stephan Seibt (composition).

**44** | Jörgen Dahlquist (text and direction) and Kent Olofson (composition). At the same time, Teatr Weimar is not only a music theatre ensemble; it also produces text-based dramatic theatre. In a statement of artistic intent, it describes itself as 'the leading collective of playwrights, directors and actors in Sweden', [www.teatrweimar.se/eng/index.htm](http://www.teatrweimar.se/eng/index.htm) (last accessed 9.4.2015). So the directorial work of Dahlquist and Olofson only refers to Teatr Weimar's music theatre productions.

**45** | In recent years, several works have come into existence in cooperation with the director Enrico Stolzenburg (e.g., *Blick Richtung Süden*, performed at the Wittener Days for New Chamber Music, 2009).

such as the collaboration between Hannes Seidl and Daniel Kötter<sup>46</sup> or between Elena Mendoza and myself.<sup>47</sup>

### **1.4.3 Vocal and instrumental ensembles**

In addition to music theatre ensembles and composers, free instrumental and vocal ensembles are increasingly vital as agents in the field of independent music theatre. I refer here to ensembles whose focus lies in (contemporary) concert music, but who appear with increasing frequency as initiators and producers of music theatre projects. For example, Neue Vocalsolisten from Stuttgart regularly launch music theatre projects, and ensembles such as 2e2m from Champigny-sur-Marne, Phace from Vienna or the Berliner Solistenensemble Kaleidoskop perceive this sort of performative orientation as integral to their profile. Close cooperation between ensembles and composers is standard here, calling to mind the long-term collaboration between Heiner Goebbels and Ensemble Modern or between Georges Aperghis and the Ictus Ensemble. This type of long-term cooperation is practiced also by Trond Reinholdtsen and the ensemble Asamisisama from Oslo or by Stefan Prins and the Nadar Ensemble from Flanders. Outside of new music theatre, these ensembles are usually regarded as leading proponents of theatrical concerts.

### **1.4.4 Production venues**

If one examines production and performance venues, one is struck by the fact that a rather slim amount of production houses exist in independent music theatre and that they are less internationally interconnected than in independent theatre. Anyone searching within the music theatre field for a network resembling the cooperation between sophiensaele, Berlin; Kampnagel, Hamburg; Theaterhaus Düsseldorf; Gessnerallee, Zurich; and brut, Vienna, for example, will emerge empty-handed. What's more, here we once again encounter a problem: production houses active in music theatre represent differing segments of the heterogeneous music theatre field and are therefore able to cooperate only restrictedly.

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**46** | See 2.7.

**47** | The two music theatre compositions *Niebla* (premiered at Hellerau, Dresden, 2007) and *La Ciudad de las Mentiras* (premiered at Teatro Real, 2017) were created under a collective authorship. For more on this, cf. also David Roesner and Clemens Risi, 'Die polyphone Werkstatt', *Theater der Zeit* (January 2009): p. 28f.; Thomas Betzwieser, 'Von Sprengungen und radialem Systemen: das aktuelle Musiktheater zwischen Institution und Innovation – eine Momentaufnahme', in: Arno Mungen (ed.), *Mitten im Leben: Musiktheater von der Oper zur Everyday Performance*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011; and Albrecht Wellmer, 'Musiktheater heute', in: Jörn Peter Hiekel (ed.), *Neue Musik in Bewegung*, 2011, p. 28f.

Neuköllner Oper in Berlin has evolved into the most important production house for independent music theatre in Germany and one of the most vibrant in Europe. Each season, it produces approximately ten premieres and runs continuous performance operations with 250 shows annually.<sup>48</sup> It has traditionally emphasised adaptations and new versions of repertoire operas as well as premiere performances of operas that embrace contemporary references or subjects. Moreover, during Peter Lund's tenure as artistic director (1996–2004), Neuköllner Oper made a name for small-scale, German-language musicals. Under the artistic directorship of Bernhard Glocksin (since 2004), it has expanded its spectrum of forms considerably. Simultaneously, however, it maintains its mission to work for a broad audience 'beyond self-referential expert circles'.<sup>49</sup>

In comparison, through its long-term cooperation with the composer Mauricio Kagel, Theater am Marienplatz (TAM) in Krefeld has placed its focus more on instrumental theatre and new music theatre. Other areas of concentration are Beckett's works and authors such as Ernst Jandl or Gerhard Rühm. Gare du Nord in Basel, brought to life in 2002 by Desirée Meiser (who is also its director), views itself as a 'train station for New Music'. An experimental venue for New Music in general, not especially for music theatre, it nevertheless mounts at least one in-house production of music theatre per season. T&M in Paris, whose origins lie in Georges Aperghis' ATEM in Nanterre, outside of Paris, dedicates itself fully to 'théâtre musical et lyrique contemporain',<sup>50</sup> although in recent times it has carried out relatively few own productions. As a member of the network Reseau Varèse (see below), it shows predominantly international high-grade productions.

As far as guest performances, co-productions and (inter)national networks are concerned, production houses in Holland or Flanders – in the motherland of independent production houses, so to speak – are much more versatile and active than those in German-speaking countries, for instance. Veenfabriek in Leiden is currently one of the largest and most successful music theatre groups in the Benelux countries. Directed by percussionist and theatre director Paul Koek, Veenfabriek arose in 2004 out of the legendary Theatergroep Hollandia, founded in 1985 by Johan Simons and Paul Koek. But actually it comes close to a theatre company in its own right since it always works with a fixed ensemble and under the artistic direction of Paul Koek (although it maintains numerous co-operations with other groups). Muziektheater Transparent in Antwerp, in comparison, has the run of a more open structure: Wouter Van Looy and Guy

<sup>48</sup> | Cf. [www.neukoellneroper.de/#profil](http://www.neukoellneroper.de/#profil).

<sup>49</sup> | Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> | See [www.theatre-musique.com](http://www.theatre-musique.com) (last accessed 28.3.2015).

Coolen being the artistic directors they present work of guest directors as well as those led by its regular director Wouter Van Looy.

#### 1.4.5 Festivals

Although festivals have become the most important producers of independent music theatre (as well as in the realm of independent theatre and New Music), festivals dedicating themselves exclusively to music theatre are rare.<sup>51</sup> Usually, contemporary music festivals programme music theatre in addition to concerts,<sup>52</sup> or they cover the entire range of the performing arts, such as the Festival d'Avignon, the Edinburgh Festival or the Holland Festival. The music theatre genres outlined above are delineated within this rich festival-scape.

Festivals for New Music focus on new music theatre *compositions*, in keeping with New Music's generally standard practice of giving priority to premiere performances and individual works. Hence, new opera or new music theatre is highlighted (see above). In contrast, for the realm of opera adaptations or those forms of musicalised theatre oriented towards postdramatic theatre, only a handful of festivals or presentation platforms exist.<sup>53</sup> The number is even lower for festivals that present the whole gamut of music theatre. A prominent role is played in this regard by Operadagen Rotterdam, where this year an adaptation of *Figaro* by the Belgian group Comp.Marius will be shown, along with *King Size* by Christoph Marthaler and Annelies Van Parys' work from the world of new opera, titled *Private View*.<sup>54</sup>

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**51** | Examples of large festivals include the Munich International Biennale for New Music Theatre and the Operadagen Rotterdam. For smaller festivals, see Tête à Tête Opera Festival, London; Festival d' Òpera de Butxaca, Barcelona (last held in 2007); Taschenopernfestival in Salzburg; or Musiktheatertage Vienna, which first took place in 2015. Between 1992 and 2007, the Almeida Theatre in London also held, under the name Almeida Opera, a summer season for new music theatre as well as New Chamber Opera.

**52** | E.g., Wien Modern, Warsaw Autumn, Ultima – Oslo Contemporary Music Festival, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, musicadho in Madrid, the Salzburg Biennale, Donaueschinger Musiktage, Maerzmusik in Berlin, and the Borealis Festival in Bergen.

**53** | At the same time, however, these forms are hardly ever presented at the free theatre platforms in question. To date, only one music theatre production could be seen at the Impulse Festival – David Marton's theatrical concert *Fairy Queen oder Hätte ich Glenn Gould nicht kennen gelernt* (after Henry Purcell) in 2007.

**54** | A Muziektheater Transparant production with the Asko/Schönberg Ensemble and Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart. It premiered on 13 May 2015 at the Vlaamse Opera, Antwerp, in coproduction with Concertgebouw, Bruges, Deutsche Oper, Berlin, Nationaloper, Bergen, and Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg.

For German-speaking countries, Gerard Mortier inspired a first-rate music theatre uncoupled from the premiere-performance-driven operations of New Music. During his founding directorship at the Ruhrtriennale (2002–2004), Mortier made ‘creations’ the official focus: the development of pieces between theatre, music and dance, without insisting that the music belong to the category of New Music. Amongst the inaugural stagings was a theatrical version of Schubert’s *Die schöne Müllerin* under the direction of Christoph Marthaler.<sup>55</sup> In spite of this, however, there is still a lack of platforms for such ‘creations’ of musicalised, postdramatic theatre and for productions of free opera and music theatre that work with pre-existing pieces.

#### 1.4.6 Networks and platforms

On the whole, independent music theatre is less well-networked than independent theatre. This goes for international music theatre scenes, but also for most national ones. The most significant and financially robust network for music theatre on the international level is the Réseau Varèse, an ‘alliance of large European festivals and presenters for the promotion and dissemination of musical creations’.<sup>56</sup> The network’s membership comprises internationally renowned European festivals such as Wien Modern, Warsaw Autumn, the Holland Festival, Klangspuren Schwaz, Maerzmusik Berlin, the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, and Ultima Oslo Contemporary Music Festival, but also smaller production houses like T&M in Paris or Casa de Musica in Porto. Although it supports and enables the international dissemination of a relatively large amount of music theatre productions, Réseau Varèse is not intended as a special instrument for the promotion of music theatre. As we have seen with the festivals I have discussed, central promotional importance is given entirely to New Music, and to music theatre only when it constitutes a segment thereof.<sup>57</sup> Thus, it also tends to be the case here that a mere portion of the broader field of music theatre is cushioned, that portion being new opera and new music theatre.

Relatively little international networking exists below this upper-level network. We can note, for example, a lack of international associations like reseo or ASSITEJ in the children’s and youth theatre sector. Between 1992 and

**55** | The directors Johan Simons and Paul Koek were also represented in the 2002 programme with several pieces. When Johan Simons, as the new director of the Ruhrtriennale, now reclaims the ‘creations’ concept, not only a programmatic but also a personal circle is completed.

**56** | Cf. statement of intent at [www.reseau-varese.com](http://www.reseau-varese.com). (last accessed 23.3.2015).

**57** | Examples of funded projects in the music theatre field include *Luna Park* by Georges Aperghis, 2011, *Kafka-Fragmente* by György Kurtág under the direction of Antoine Gindt, 2007, and *Eraritaritjaka* by Heiner Goebbels, 2004.

2004 – a time of growth for independent music theatre – a network brought to life by Dragan Klaic from the Netherlands Theatre Institute known as NewOp/NonOp existed. It organised individual annual meetings in different locations together with respective local partners, meetings that facilitated exchange, discussion and networking amongst agents in the ‘Small-Scale Contemporary Music-Theatre and Opera’ field.<sup>58</sup> The list of the forty-nine participating companies from throughout Western Europe and Canada alone gives one a feeling of independent music theatre’s potential at that time. The last of these meetings took place in Barcelona and was presented by Festival d’Opera de Butxaca. No further meetings took place.<sup>59</sup>

What independent music theatre urgently needs, in addition to networking amongst producers and internal exchange amongst the different ensembles and artists, is greater visibility and the creation of its own discourse. The International Theatre Institute (ITI) is striving to respond to this need through its internationally operative competition Music Theatre Now. The competition, held triennially since 2008, awards prizes in various categories such as ‘first productions of new works, which were professionally created anywhere in the world’.<sup>60</sup> Simultaneously, the institute facilitates guest performances within key festivals for at least a portion of the award recipients, so that the productions can then be presented to the public anew as prize winners that have garnered significant attention.<sup>61</sup>

The new directors of The Munich Biennale, International Festival for new music theatre, Daniel Ott and Manos Tsangaris, are also vigorously setting their sights on the internationalisation of the field. Concurrently, they wish to orient the Biennale more strongly towards young artists, thereby rekindling the idea of its founding father, Hans Werner Henze. Besides inviting specifically targeted artists, their concept’s core idea lies in the establishment of international platforms where production teams (composers, directors, and musicians) can present themselves through concepts and initial results of working processes. These presentations occur in the form of workshops guided by artistic advisors, making it possible for teams to obtain qualified advice for their continued work on the projects in question. At the same instant, Daniel Ott and Manos Tsangaris can form a picture of the projects at an early stage and finally select those which exhibit the quality requisite for an invitation to Munich. Daniel Ott’s and Manos Tsangaris’ efforts are pointing to new ways of confronting the basic problem of festival programming: innovative projects should be initiated,

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**58** | This was the network’s original name. Cf. [www.notnicemusic.com/NewOp.html](http://www.notnicemusic.com/NewOp.html).

**59** | An attempt was made under the name ‘C-Opera listserv’ to continue the discussion in the form of an e-mail list. Cf. [www.notnicemusic.com/C-Opera.html](http://www.notnicemusic.com/C-Opera.html).

**60** | [www.musictheatrenow2015.iti-germany.de/index.php?id=88](http://www.musictheatrenow2015.iti-germany.de/index.php?id=88).

**61** | Prizes in the current competition will be awarded at the Operadagen Rotterdam.

but projects which receive commissions ought not to fail, as this would go on the books as the festival's failure. This frequently means that festival commissions are awarded with a low tolerance for risk, by continually inviting the 'already arrived'. The Munich Biennale's concept allows for risk control by other means, which in turn allows – and this must prove itself starting in 2016 – for a more risk-friendly programming with high quality standards. What's more, a new model for cooperation between artists and festival directors is being initiated. Directors put their decisions up for discussion at the forefront, distribute them over multiple shoulders and, above all, open themselves up to discussion with production teams, including those who are not invited to Munich. This enhances transparency in the decision-making process.

Last but not least, this approach favours a certain working method: from the start, the focus lies on cooperation between composers, directors, musicians and so forth. The perspective shifts from the commissioned composition (as 'work'), which is also staged in the second step, to collectively conceived and produced performance events (see 2.1).

As concerns the degree of networking and the available structures, the individual situations in various national contexts are naturally quite different. In the Benelux countries, where touring belongs to the basic understanding and mission of independent theatre, the degree of networking is comparatively high. The Dutch system was also equipped with substantial subsidies, at least until the cultural clear-cutting of 2013.

Independent music theatre in Great Britain, on the one hand, has no such networks at its disposal. Nonetheless, the Opera & Music Theatre Forum (OMTF), for example, has existed since 1993 as a 'network of companies working to create an environment in which opera and music theatre can flourish'.<sup>62</sup> OMTF maintains a website where events and projects by members are publicised and formally introduced. The Forum thereby offers an overview – although one limited to OMTF members – of what is happening in the world of British independent music theatre. Beyond this, the Forum assumes lobbying responsibilities and offers member workshops devoted to topics such as promotion and audience development.

In countries like Portugal, Spain or Greece, on the other hand, where no stable tradition of independent music theatre has evolved, the situation has markedly worsened since 2008 due to the economic crisis. Lighthouse projects like the festival *musicadho*y in Madrid, which was counted for years amongst top-notch festivals, has had to discontinue the music theatre series *operadho*y almost completely.<sup>63</sup> The festival *Opera d'Butxaca* was also forced to throw in the towel in 2008, although it continues operations as *Òpera de Butxaca*.

**62** | [www.omtf.org.uk](http://www.omtf.org.uk).

**63** | The festival consequently withdrew from the network Réseau Varèse.

i nova creació on a project-to-project basis and by means of international co-productions (with Theater Basel and Neuköllner Oper Berlin, et al.).<sup>64</sup>

Italy constitutes a special case in this regard, because in the fifties, sixties and seventies it was amongst the European centres of New Music<sup>65</sup> and boasted a series of interesting music theatre composers.<sup>66</sup> Since the economic crisis, however, New Music in Italy has almost ground to a halt. The Italian composers who are still very present on the international music theatre scene celebrate their success almost exclusively outside of Italy.<sup>67</sup>

In light of the particular theatre system in German-speaking countries, an exceptional debate over stronger networking has developed here. As is the case with independent theatre, recent years have seen an increased effort to foster and try out different forms of cooperation between independent theatre and municipal or state theatre. An important funding instrument serving this purpose is the German Federal Cultural Foundation's Doppelpass Fund, an investment in partnerships between independent groups and public performance venues in Germany. Out of the twenty-two currently funded tandems, three are from the field of music theatre.<sup>68</sup>

The Nordrhein-Westfalen Fonds Experimentelles Musiktheater (Experimental Music Theatre Fund) is another body which sponsors such co-operations. Each year, a jury selects one project to be realised by a municipal theatre in the region.<sup>69</sup> Finally, I should mention some initiatives by individual houses here which cooperate with independent music theatre (or more specifically, offer it a platform). Deutsche Oper Berlin, for instance, created a discrete performance venue, opening the Tischlerei in 2012, which is intended to give space to

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**64** | Cf. e-mail interview with Dietrich Grosse, OPNC director since 07.11.2013.

**65** | Specific centres were Rome and the milieu surrounding Nuova Consonanza; the studio of RAI in Milan, which was founded in 1955 by Luciano Berio and Bruno Maderna; or the festival Settimana internazionale di nuova musica in Palermo, where the Cologne and Darmstadt avant-garde gathered in its entirety.

**66** | One thinks, for example, of the music theatre works of Luigi Nono and Luciano Berio, but also of lesser-known composers such as Domenico Guaccero or Egisto Macchi. Cf. Raymond Fearn, *Italian Opera since 1945*, Amsterdam: Harwood, 1997.

**67** | E.g., Salvatore Sciarrino, Lucia Ronchetti or Giorgio Battistelli.

**68** | Komische Oper Berlin and Gob Squad, LOFFT Leipzig and Oper Dynamo West, as well as Dock 11 and Jo Fabian Department.

**69** | In recent years, Theater Bielefeld, for example, or the Musiktheater im Revier in Gelsenkirchen have participated. Starting in 2015, the funding concept will undergo some modifications. The funding will be oriented less towards developing a premiere performance, but will be understood as a residency – a funding period during which a team of artists can explore and 'transpose' particular themes in cooperation with a municipal theatre using music-theatrical means.

such experimental encounters. The Staatsoper Hamburg's experimental stage, *opera stabile*, has cooperated (at least in phases) with the free ensemble *opera silens*, which originated in 1995 from the environment surrounding the degree programme 'Directing Music Theatre' in Hamburg.<sup>70</sup> Be that as it may, opera houses will not truly open up towards experimental music theatre formats and begin productive partnerships with independent music theatre until the opera houses are prepared to furnish such venues with budgets of their own. If projects must be financed via external subvention funds established for independent theatre, then the opening up of the houses, though indeed welcome, remains questionable in a cultural-political sense.<sup>71</sup>

## 2. LINES OF INNOVATION IN THE FIELD OF INDEPENDENT MUSIC THEATRE

In accordance with the heterogeneity and diversity of the field I attempted to sketch in the first main section, it is clear that agents' artistic practices are also highly varied, and that each belongs to specific traditions and depends on the given structural situations within which the artistic work is carried out. Nevertheless, it appears possible to mark certain questions or thematic fields related to artistic engagement that characterise the aesthetic practices of independent music theatre and within which the most sizeable innovative potential is currently to be found. Each of these will be loosely sketched out in the following and briefly expanded upon by way of examples in the form of concrete projects. These discrete examples were chosen not because they were representative of their respective area, but because they take *one* concrete, relevant artistic stance within it. As stated at the beginning, public opera houses and the independent theatre scene serve as the frames of reference for our selection.

### 2.1 Working Processes

Independent music theatre offers the opportunity to shape the processes by which individual pieces emerge, and do so independent of the well-rehearsed routines and structural constraints of traditional opera houses. Obviously, this is not a case of limitless freedom (see above). On the contrary, any room

<sup>70</sup> | Cf. [www.operasilens.de](http://www.operasilens.de).

<sup>71</sup> | A successful example of a long-term cooperation between a municipality (i.e., a municipal theatre) and independent music theatre is the collaboration between *Veenfabriek* Leiden and *Schauspielhaus* Bochum at the beginning of Anselm Weber's tenure as director (2010–2013).

to manoeuvre depends on the financial, structural and personnel-related conditions under which productions are brought to life. In spite of this, such relative autonomy is the reason why many professional music theatre makers have opted to develop a project in the independent realm.

The great potential of independent music theatre hence consists in inventing the working process *at the same time* as the project idea, in other words, deriving processes from necessities occasioned by project ideas and from participants' individual needs and working methods. A salient point is that amongst the eighteen free ensembles of the Viennese music theatre scene who were interviewed by Jury Everhartz und Kristine Tornquist,<sup>72</sup> all but one emphasised that they adhere neither to a fixed method nor an unchanging procedure, but design the process differently from project to project.

In relation to his own work, Georges Aperghis encapsulates this aspect when he says, 'Your prior experiences don't help you. [...] I want to dive into new adventures, more difficult ones as there is no experience'.<sup>73</sup>

The eschewing of the use of only one methodology is directly related to his fundamental interest in the unmistakable uniqueness which 'his' musicians transport as individuals. Similarly, his compositions are often musical portraits of the musicians themselves, and challenge them to exceed the boundaries of their own previously estimated faculties: 'Often, when they receive the score, they are excited yet afraid at the same time of its difficulty'.<sup>74</sup>

Hence, many of his music-theatrical pieces actually emerge during rehearsal. What Aperghis, for example, composes during the pre-rehearsal preparatory phase of pieces like *Machinations* (2000) or the children's music theatre work *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge* (2001) amounts to no more and no less than material, just as text or video material might exist. In *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*, for instance, the composed music consisted of twenty-three short pieces: isolated moments that were not composed expressly for the project and that did not imply a particular formal arrangement, dramaturgy or order. Not until rehearsal, which occurred simultaneously with the staging process, were these fragments fully assembled into a large-scale form. One could describe this as a kind of situational composing, because the musical-theatrical composition takes place within the complexity of all the piece's participant elements. The score, which was finally published to enable further performances of the piece,

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**72** | Loc. cit.

**73** | 'Les expériences les plus anciennes ne te servent pas. (...) Je veux me lancer dans des aventures nouvelles, plus difficiles parce qu'il n'y a pas une expérience.' (Georges Aperghis in an interview with Matthias Rebstock in: Rebstock/Roesner, *Composed Theatre*, p. 239).

**74** | Georges Aperghis in: Catherine Maximoff and Georges Aperghis, *Storm Beneath a Skull*, DVD documentation, Juxta Productions, 2006.

did not emerge until afterwards. Rather than being the starting point of the musical-theatrical development process, it is its ending point. Although this process was obviously directed by Aperghis, he designed this direction to entice his players to creatively insert their own personalities into the development process, both musically and theatrically.<sup>75</sup> Through this special working method, no difference between piece (composition) and staging (collectively developed musical/theatrical totality) surfaces at first. The status of a musical work represented by the score – which in the case of *Rotkäppchen* contains no stage directions – is only attained retrospectively. Many earlier pieces for which this last step did not occur have in fact become lost to the ephemerality of performances.<sup>76</sup>

In his music theatre, Heiner Goebbels likewise relies wholly on creativity and free exchange amongst the participants. Unlike Aperghis, he follows a more or less standardised structure. Approximately one year before a music theatre work premieres, he conducts a workshop in which everyone ‘works using all, even if only thinkable, means’, and in which every person involved in the project convenes, regardless of whether they ultimately operate on or off-stage. ‘In this try-out time, this time of experimentation, there is a relatively autonomous kind of activity amongst all the forces connected to the theatre.’ Since the choice was made that this phase accommodate the initiative of all participants, ‘actually vastly more than what I can imagine emerges, even though I’ve come up with the criteria’<sup>77</sup>.

Here Goebbels strongly emphasises that all theatrical elements of a piece must be available during these workshops. With costumes, light and video, for instance, this also pertains to elements that in traditional rehearsal processes do not come into play until quite late and hence cannot exceed an ‘illustrative’ role or become elementary to the grammar of a piece: ‘Anything which comes late in the process is only going to be illustrative; it does not have the power to change anything else which has already been established during the rehearsal period’.<sup>78</sup> Then, following the workshops and the phase of open and

**75** | Cf. here Markus Gammel’s documentation of the rehearsal process in *Rotkäppchen ist der Wolf: Kreativität im Musiktheater von Georges Aperghis*, Master’s thesis, Humboldt University Berlin.

**76** | This applies in particular to earlier works by Aperghis at ATEM. For example, only isolated players’ notations of the piece *Enumerations* (1990) still exist; however, the piece was produced as a film, and has at least been thus preserved.

**77** | Heiner Goebbels interviewed by Wolfgang Schneider in: idem., ‘Ein synergetisches Ausprobieren. Heiner Goebbels über kollektive Kreativität, Inspiration und Inszenierungsprozesse’, in: Stephan Porombka, Wolfgang Schneider and Volker Wortmann, (eds.): *Kollektive Kreativität*, Tübingen: Francke, 2006, p. 116.

**78** | Heiner Goebbels in: Rebstock/Roesner, *Composed Theatre*, p. 116.

associative experimentation, comes a phase during which Goebbels withdraws and composes the piece from start to finish, determining the total form. In other words, and in contrast to Aperghis, the musical form is decided upon by Goebbels alone and is then practised during the final rehearsals.

It is certainly no accident that both of these most prominent exemplars of collective development processes in music theatre are composers with whom the musical and the theatrical processes are carried out by one and the same person. But also many artistic teams show great interest in the collective development of pieces, in intensive exchange beyond the confines of professional competency categories and in the concomitant subversion of classical hierarchies. Here independent music theatre adopts techniques endemic to independent theatre and dance theatre. The English term 'devised theatre' has taken root to describe such approaches; a German equivalent is lacking. Even still, a 'devised music theatre' poses a complex field of research, because in such a field, classical concepts like 'work', 'performance', 'score', 'composition', 'direction', 'authorship' and classical concepts of professionalism become fluid and undergo redefinition by necessity.

## 2.2 Other Places and Spaces

Very few independent music theatre ensembles can call a venue their own. This is usually due to practical resources. And yet many ensembles feel that always playing in new locations and creating new spaces is crucial to their artistic engagement.<sup>79</sup> Thomas Desi from ZOON Musiktheater in Vienna makes the following remark:

'My projects for ZOON are made with the intention of using nontheatrical spaces for theatre. Not in order to conceal the poorness of this theatre, nor to underline the rootlessness of these projects, but rather to introduce the element of the authenticity of the here and now.'<sup>80</sup>

Making such everyday nontheatrical places into theatre sites implies a theatre that attempts to destabilize the threshold between art and the everyday, that desires to exit the 'cultural temple' and step 'out towards people'. As such, an

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**79** | In the following, I use 'places' or 'sites' when referring to geographic localities, and 'spaces' to mean spaces for action or specific atmospheres. Cf. here, for instance, Michel de Certeau, *Kunst des Handelns*, Berlin: Merve, 1988 (originally published in 1980), p. 218f, and Henri Lefebvre, 'Die Produktion des Raums', in: Jörg Dünne and Stephan Günzel (eds.), *Raumtheorie*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2006, p. 330ff.

**80** | Thomas Desi, 'ZOON Musiktheater', in Everhartz/Tornquist, *Fragen an das Musiktheater*, p. 43.

impulse is carried further here, one already emitted by the free theatre of the seventies, one whose effects continue to be felt when performances take place, for example, at old coal mining complexes during the Ruhrtriennale.<sup>81</sup> Aside from that, however, such places quite concretely offer possibilities for different ways of staging, for characteristic actions, performative materials or situations that can be incorporated into stagings and that do not exist in stage spaces. Beyond this, spaces that are most often sought out already transport a certain atmosphere of their own. Besides public places, places normally inaccessible to the larger public are therefore often chosen (mines, bunkers, old factory buildings, casinos, hotels, harbour installations, etc.), places charged with associations, expectations and a certain aura simply by virtue of their identity. And finally, such places are often accompanied by another relation between players and audience, thanks, for instance, to spatial constriction, to unusual spatial placement of the audience or to unusual seating arrangements resulting from site-specific circumstances, and so forth.

Playing music theatre in such atypical places is essential to the core profile of the Nuremberg-based Pocket Opera Company, which celebrated the fortieth anniversary of its existence last year: *Shooting Stars* is a reworking of *Freischütz* and is playing in the Nürnberger Volksfest; Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* was once performed in a city bus and then in a launderette (*Air Bus Adventure*, 2001; and *Wash House Adventure*, 2012) and Verdi's *Macbeth* resounded on the Reichsparteitagsgelände (1995). Typical of such POC stagings is that the sites are not always an obvious pick, sometimes being employed instead as a contrast. In this vein, the love story between Venus and Adonis in the Peruvian baroque opera *La Púrpura de la rosa* was played in a rather prosaic former bus depot.<sup>82</sup> The POC has intensified its inclusion of popular theatre elements as well: as such, the parcours artists *Crap Movements* played the old Montagehalle in the aforementioned staging; fire artists appeared in *One charming night* (2004), a combination of Purcell's *Fairy Queen* and Bussotti's *La Passion selon Sade*; and in *pocs space enterprise* from 2010, itself also a collage, this time of Monteverdi, Purcell, Schumann and Saint-Saens, the breakdance company Bounce! assumed a central role.

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**81** | Here too, independent music theatre basically only re-enacted what had already started in the 70s in independent theatre and visual art under the heading 'site-specific theatre' or 'site-specific art'. Be that as it may, music theatre's engagement with space has also blazed its own trails, to the extent that it thematises, in particular, perspectives of listening and sound.

**82** | *La Púrpura de la rosa* by Tomás de Torrejón y Velasco (music) and Pedro Calderón de la Barca, 2014.



Figure 1: '*La púrpura de la rosa*', German première, IGMIV-Halle in Nuremberg/Schweinau, 2014. Photograph: Herbert Liedel

The music of these operas consistently conveys a strongly reworked sound, in new instrumentations and for a chamber ensemble. As much as each separate staging is inspired by its selected site, the music remains untouched by the place; in other words, the music could, in principle, be played in other spaces and is not based on the acoustic possibilities presented by a space.

Another treatment of spaces is shown in the works of Oper Dynamo West, which is not concerned with setting pieces in a certain space, but with developing pieces in respect to text, performance and music on the very basis of a space:

'We inspect and explore places, we hold interviews and collect materials. We interweave the resulting research material with fictive elements and show our pieces on site or bring them into the theatre. We work with the architecture and history of our performance sites. We influence and transform urban structures; we "go behind their backs". The music for our stagings, too, emerges as part of a research process; it arises out of the sounds and noises of a place and its people, or out of previously known compositions that suddenly sound different in an actual, material context.'<sup>83</sup>

Currently Oper Dynamo West is a team of seven theatre makers who work together on varying projects in constantly varying constellations and with differing functions.<sup>84</sup> Oper Dynamo West is therefore not an ensemble, but rather more a production group recognisable by a specific approach to music

**83** | [www.operdynamowest.org](http://www.operdynamowest.org).

**84** | Oper Dynamo West is run by Janina Benduski (dramaturgy/production/PR), Janina Janke (direction/stage), Soo-eun Lee (stage/costume/performance), Johannes Müller

theatre instead of a specific artistic handwriting.<sup>85</sup> In *Das Wort haben die Benutzer* (The users have the floor) from 2012, sound research serves as the central starting point. Janina Jansen took on the role of director in this project and collaborated with the American composer Bill Dietz. Together they surveyed two apartment buildings in Berlin and Marseille, both built by Le Corbusier and nearly identical in design. Jansen and Dietz gathered image and sound material in the buildings, made recordings of the acoustic surroundings and conducted interviews with the inhabitants, asking them about their favourite music. Then Dietz converted these field recordings and interview tapes into a composition that was played during the performances (or more specifically, during the theatrical tours through the building) on inhabitants' private stereo systems and visitors' mobile listening devices.<sup>86</sup> The dramaturgy of this sort of music theatre is no longer carried by the music, the text or a plot, but rather by the places and spaces themselves. It must be 'walked through' by each viewer; it remains fragile, momentary and fragmentary.



Figure 2: 'La Parole est aux usagers', art project by Bill Dietz and Janina Janke, Marseille 2013. Photograph: Benjamin Krieg

(direction), Andrea Oberfeld (production), Julie Rüter (stage/costume) and Frederike Wagner (communications design).

**85** | Cf. interview by Mireia Ludwig with Andrea Oberfeld and Johannes Müller on 24.6.2013.

**86** | Cf. [www.operdynamowest.org](http://www.operdynamowest.org). Musiktheater bruit works with a similar approach underpinned by sound research and interviews in their project *Klangexpedition Ural*, Ballhaus Ost, Berlin, 2013, as do Gordon Kampe, Ivan Bazak and Katharina Ortmann in their project *Plätze Dächer Leute Wege. Musiktheater für ein utopisches Bielefeld*, funded by Fonds Experimentelles Musiktheater, by spending two years initiating and composing Bielefeld inhabitants' utopias for change in their city (premiered 29.4.2015, Theater Bielefeld).

## 2.3 Other Forms and Formats

What stands out here is an intensive search for other performance formats in independent music theatre. One notable tendency is a turn towards installation-based forms. Here the music frequently takes on the task of unfurling spaces of sound (that is, spaces of listening) rather than limning them as temporal or dramatic arcs of tension. In comparison to the traditional understanding of an ephemeral time-based art, music is understood here more in terms of its materiality, its bodily dimension and its immediate relation to space – space being the very thing that enables it to resound in the first place. Experiences with repetitive music and minimal music as well as sound art and sound installation manifest within such forms.<sup>87</sup>

In the same spirit, Berthold Schneider invested in the consistency of music's spatial character in his version of *Einstein on the Beach* by Phillip Glass and Robert Wilson. He dissolved opera's basic classical and frontal situation and transformed it into a walk-through installation.<sup>88</sup> For the piece's site, Schneider chose the Parochialkirche in Berlin for its characteristic rounded base construction that thwarts any implication of a spatial separation between performers and audience. There were various objects and visual stations spread across the space; even the musicians were dispersed, or rather, they moved throughout. The viewers could likewise move freely within this opera installation, able to determine their distance from the musicians autonomously and freely choose the length of their stay at individual stations. However, the decisive impression was that it was the sound of the music itself, its material quality that generated the installation's space.

In a completely different tenor, the composer and installation artist Georg Nussbaumer has worked for many years on music theatre installations by continually tackling components and stock motifs from the inexhaustible Wagner cosmos. In *Ringlandschaft mit Bierstrom*<sup>89</sup> he shatters the score of the

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**87** | This change in perspective is currently strengthened in particular by Sound Studies, and by Cultural Studies' engagement with audio cultures. Cf., for instance, Holger Schulze (ed.), *Sound Studies: Traditionen – Methoden – Desiderate*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2008; Jonathan Sterne (ed.), *The Sound Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 2012 or Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, New York: Continuum, 2004.

**88** | Premiered in 2005. Furthermore, Berthold Schneider directed the *staatsbank berlin* together with Susanne Vinzenz from 1999 to 2003. This was the only production house for music theatre in Berlin that consistently committed itself to new and experimental forms of music theatre.

**89** | Together with the Solistenensemble Kaleidoskop, Donaueschinger Musiktage and sophiensaele Berlin, 2013. Other examples: *Milchstrom*, *Fragebett*, *Gralsmaschinen* –

*Ring* entirely and turns it into a grab bag of material for a sixteen-hour installation where allusions and associations from the Wagner cosmos repeatedly surface acoustically as well as visually and then drift away as an immense acoustic entity. The musicians in the Solistenensemble Kaleidoskop act in spatial – but not musical – separation within diverse installations that quarry the very basis of the Wagner legend by means of Nussbaumer's drastic signature fantasy. In a certain way, these music theatre installations by Nussbaumer are inner spaces of association or resonance, turned inside out to become physical spaces through which an audience can wander, spaces where Nussbaumer's Wagner obsession can reverberate.

Such spatio-installative forms, like those displayed nowadays in the opera installations of Schneider, Nussbaumer and many others, are the consequence of a specific disposition regarding content and music. They are not, say, 'directorial gags' or mere staging strategies; they ensue from a transmuted understanding of music (Schneider), or they let arise music and scenery – space of hearing and space of seeing – in unmediated interrelation with one another (Nussbaumer).



Figure 3: 'Ringlandschaft mit Bierstrom – ein Wagner-Areal', (world première)  
St. Johannes-Evangelist-Kirche, Berlin 2013. Photograph: Karin Haas

The forms and formats presently evolving throughout the diverse sectors of independent music theatre throw similar essential features into relief, features that are characteristic of the development of theatre in general and that can only be roughly sketched with bywords such as the performativity and

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*Ein Lohengrin-Gelände*, Kunstfest Weimar, 2013; *Die Jaffa Orangen des Richard W. – ein israelisches Rheingold*, Radialsystem V Berlin and Operadagen Rotterdam, 2012.

‘eventness’ (*Ereignishaftigkeit*) of theatre, the emphasised role of bodily and material enactments and processes, or, as already described, the act of working with atmospheres and spaces. Within this broad scenario of contemporary theatre aesthetics music theatre must define its position in each case based on the relation between music and action, or put differently, between hearing and seeing. In its fundamentally nonlinguistic, performative and emotional character, music is a predestined element of today’s theatre – text-based dramatic theatre not excluded. But the fundamental interrogation and composition of the relation between hearing and seeing is within the purview of music theatre in particular. Against this backdrop, those directions in independent music theatre that orient themselves not first and foremost narratively, but rather phenomenologically, that is when they directly investigate specific perceptive circumstances and situations.<sup>90</sup>

With *winzig. Musiktheaterminiaturen – Musiktheater für ein Haus* (1993/98),<sup>91</sup> Manos Tsangaris has invented such a format, which he has since steadily cultivated in a series of pieces with consistently new elements.<sup>92</sup> *winzig* consists of a series of music theatre miniatures, each of a few minutes length, each based on a highly specified constellation regarding how viewers and musicians relate to one another and to the space. According to the principle of the show booth, a limited number of viewers are able to see a miniature, whereupon another group is granted entry and the piece is repeated. Besides this, there are pieces that are constructed as installations and played for the entire duration of the

**90** | Cf. Matthias Rebstock, ‘Im Fluchtpunkt der Sinne. Musiktheater als Arbeit an einer Phänomenologie des Hörens’, in: Christa Brüstle, Clemens Risi and Stephanie Schwarz (eds.), *Macht Ohnmacht Zufall*, Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2012.

**91** | Premiere: Alte Feuerwache, Cologne, 1993.

**92** | Further stages of the concept of *winzig* are *Die Döner-Schaltung. Stationentheater für großes Ensemble*, Bühnen der Stadt, 2004; *Drei Räume Theater Suite. Stationentheater für großes Ensemble*, Donaueschinger Musiktage, 2004; *Diskrete Stücke. Stationentheater. Hörszenen für einzelne Betrachter*, WDR, Musik der Zeit, 2007; or *Batsheba. Eat The History! Installation opera für Schauspieler, Sänger, Chor und Orchestermaander*, Donaueschinger Musiktage and Magazin der Staatsoper unter den Linden, 2008/2009. The cultivation of the concept consists, amongst other things, in Tsangaris’ crossing his ‘phenomenological’, abstract concept of *winzig* with content-driven and narrative aspects, thereby deriving a new narrative form from this hybridisation. For more on this, see also Matthias Rebstock, ‘Vom Erzählen im Neuen Musiktheater’, *positionen* 55 (May 2003). For Manos Tsangaris’ Stationentheater, see also Jörn Peter Hiekel, ‘Erhellende Passagen’, *Musik und Ästhetik*, vol. 52 (October 2009): pp. 48–60; and Julia Cloot, ‘Gesamtkunstwerk und multimediales Musiktheater’, in: Udo Bermbach, Dieter Borchmeyer and Hermann Danuser (eds.), *Wagner und die Neue Musik*, Vol. 2 of *wagnerspectrum* (2010), Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2010, p. 130ff.

performance without interruption. Here the audience decides on the length of their stay. Peculiar to all these pieces of limited length is their commencement out of complete darkness and their precisely and thoroughly composed lighting dramaturgies, which, just like the actions or instrumental and vocal parts, are set forth in the score.

For instance, the piece *winzig* from the *winzig* cycle is written for a classical concert situation. Six musicians sit on the stage, and seven people form the audience. Amongst these seven, three other musicians are intermingled as members of an 'artificial audience'<sup>93</sup> who, at the beginning of the performance, crumple candy wrappers, make comments and engage in other typical concert rituals. During the piece, they 'play' their seatmates directly on the ears, thus superimposing an intimate, close-range hearing space over the public space of the on-stage 'concert'.

In *Sessellift*, the situation's intimacy is engendered in a different way: here, two viewers sit across from a 'lift operator'. The piece lasts for the duration of a lift ride to the top and then back to the bottom floor. During the ride, the lift operator executes small instrumental actions of a seemingly ritual nature. One can see a shrine of sorts, or a mini-stage, upon which 'a figure-like sheaf, a little pocket torch, a little bone'<sup>94</sup> are visible in the half-light. At the turning point of the lift ride, the doors open and one looks through a window onto passers-by making their way to another piece with no suspicion of being watched. In the window hang two taxidermy animals: 'a bird and a fish'<sup>95</sup>

*winzig* employs such means to question the relation between audience and 'stage'; it rings the changes through highly diverse constellations of seeing and hearing and transfers the viewers into each constellation's respective concrete perceptual situation, to which they must actively respond in one way or the other. The safeguarded, and in this sense impartial, passive observer position associated with the concert, or with the opera house, is unswervingly subverted.

## 2.4 Interactivity and Intermediality

Since its inception, the music theatre of the sixties was closely linked to technological developments of the time. This calls to mind *Variations V* (1965) by John Cage, where different photo cell systems translate dance movements into sound, or his experiments with record players or radio sets (*imaginary landscape No. 5* and *radio music*),<sup>96</sup> Alvin Lucier's experiments with amplified brain waves (*Mu-*

<sup>93</sup> | Manos Tsangaris, *winzig* (score), Cologne: Thürmchen, 2006, trans. W.W.

<sup>94</sup> | Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> | Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> | Cf. Hans Rudolf Zeller, 'Medienkomposition nach John Cage', in: Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn (eds.), *John Cage I* (Musikkonzepte: special volume), Munich: List, 1990.

*sic for Solo Performer, 1965*) or the live electronic music theatre works of Gordon Mumma or Robert Ashley in the ONCE group.<sup>97</sup> At the same time, music theatre always gained essential stimuli through developments in the field of electronic music and computer music. In contrast to theatre, highly funded institutions already existed in this realm, where artists and technicians or programmers inspired one another to innovate.<sup>98</sup> These studios for electronic music or computer music were at first located mainly within radio broadcasting institutions,<sup>99</sup> but today they exist mostly as independent institutions<sup>100</sup> or facilities in universities<sup>101</sup> where software and interfaces, some of which are relevant to the music theatre field, are developed. Yet here we are moving within a border area adjacent to a broader field spanning from what is usually designated as music theatre, fields like 'media art', 'intermedia' or 'multimedia' (with their aggregate theematics of 'human/machine' and 'extended bodies'<sup>102</sup>), and dance theatre.

This link is revealed, for instance, in the work of Theater der Klänge in Düsseldorf, founded in 1987 by the composer Jorg U. Lensing, who still directs the group. At quite an early date, Lensing was already engaging with possibilities of how movement, music and video could be interlinked via computer. The 2010 *Suite Intermedial* is one of these works. It is a sort of résumé of all these experiences, allowing the theatre space itself to become a complex instrument. The performers – Lensing works predominantly with dancers – move in order to intentionally trigger specific sounds to which they can respond through movement. Such a feedback loop affects movement as well as video. The piece's individual parts were developed by means of spatial improvisations and ongoing refinement of the programmed Max/msp patches. There is no score. The performance's precision is achieved by the exactitude of the dancers' movement sequences. Since none of the space's complex wiring is visible to the audience, the piece's impression is more of a dance performance.

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**97** | Cf. Ralf Dietrich, 'Unzensierte Simultaneität der Stimmen. Robert Ashleys Frühwerk', *MusikTexte* 88 (Februar 2001): pp. 63–80.

**98** | Cf. Steffen Scholl, *Musik-Raum-Technik. Zur Entwicklung und Anwendung der grafischen Programmierumgebung "Max"*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2014.

**99** | E.g., the WDR Cologne studio or the studio of RAI in Milan; other early studios that were not linked to broadcasting stations were e.g. the Siemens-Studio for Electronic Music in Munich or the Institute for Sonology, Utrecht.

**100** | E.g., IRCAM in Paris, STEIM in Amsterdam oder ZKM in Karlsruhe.

**101** | E.g., the Institute for Sonology in Utrecht that moved to the University of Den Haag in 1986, or the Studio for Electronic music at the Technische Universität Berlin.

**102** | E.g., [www.medienkunstnetz.de/themen/cyborg\\_bodies](http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themen/cyborg_bodies). And Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance and Installation*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007.

As far as the method and way of thinking is concerned, however, it all boils down to a form of composition, or composed theatre.<sup>103</sup>

Besides this type of interactive media deployment, a number of works currently investigate media boundaries through the realisation of specific 'cross-transferential' projects in diverse media. The work of the liquid penguin ensemble,<sup>104</sup> for example, is noteworthy in that its pieces can enter into distinct aggregate states. In so doing, they move between New Music, music theatre, installation and radio play. *Gras wachsen hören*, for instance, began as an installation with sounds governed by plants. Three versions followed, each of which took shape through an invited guest: concertante with the percussionist Dirk Rothbrust, a dance performance through a collaboration with the dancer Annick Pütz and a theatre performance with the actor Bernd Neunzling. The texts of this last version served as the germ cell for the radio play *Gras wachsen hören. Bout du Monde* also exists both as music-theatrical performance and as radio play.

Whereas the above pieces deal with the successive translation of a theme into varying medial formats, the Dutch composer and director Michel van der Aa works with the friction generated between film and live performance. In *Up-Close*, a thirty-minute 'film opera',<sup>105</sup> the cellist Sol Gabetta steps into an imaginary dialogue with her alter ego: an old woman (played by Vakil Eelman). On the stage is a string orchestra. The soloist sits where the conductor normally stands. A video projection screen is placed to the side, and in front of it is a section of empty stage. The film alternates between two settings: we see the old woman in a forest, and later in an abandoned house. She writes enigmatic codes on small slips of paper, which she then sticks into preserve jars in the house. But then we suddenly see her in the same space in which the concert is taking place. The orchestra's chairs are visible and their stand lamps are on, but the space is vacant. The old woman on this abandoned stage in the film seems to be watching the young soloist play on the real stage. The two temporal levels of the film and the stage reality come into contact. Later, parallel actions emerge: both women carry a large floor lamp through the space simultaneously, but they do not encounter one another. The temporal levels remain in a state of surreal simultaneity. Nonetheless, there is an apparently causal link between the two 'worlds': mid-piece, we see in the film how the old woman switches on a machine which can apparently decipher the codes on the slips of paper. When the machine is turned on, the string orchestra, after a long pause, strikes up again as if the film reality were causally connected to the stage reality and could

**103** | For a comprehensive account of this working mode, see Rebstock/Roesner, *Composed Theatre*, pp. 155–168.

**104** | The liquid penguin ensemble was founded in 1997 in Saarbrücken by the director Katharina Bihler and the composer Stefan Scheib.

**105** | Tim Rutherford-Johnson, DVD booklet.

‘power on’ the orchestra. In his works, Michel van der Aa sophisticatedly plays with topoi of film music. Whereas the film at first seems to accompany the cello concert, it later becomes its ‘actual’ reality and, accordingly, its ‘meta-physical’ condition. The media engage in dialogue with one another in new ways; their realities infiltrate and reflect one another.



Figure 4: Vakil Eelman in ‘Up Close’.  
Photograph: Michel van der Aa

## 2.5 Embodied and Disembodied Voices

It is plain to see that the examination of the voice is a central concern and constant challenge for independent music theatre. Here I will discuss three traditions which appear to me particularly interesting today.<sup>106</sup>

**106** | In recent years, a contribution has likewise been made by Theatre Studies’ and Media Studies’ deepening interest in the issue of the voice, whereby the voice in music theatre has also been repeatedly thematised. Cf. Doris Kolesch et. al. (eds.), *Stimm-Welten*, Bielfeld: transcript, 2009; Brigitte Felderer (ed.), *Phonorama. Eine Kulturgeschichte der Stimme als Medium*, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2005; Friedrich Kittler, Thomas Macho

For the new music theatre as well as experimental music theatre of the 50s and 60s, a material-oriented approach initially served as a defining factor, an approach which, in its engagement with the phonetic research of the time, understood and composed vocal utterances as abstract sound material. In the process, the field of the expressive was also examined in its extremes, though generally without any relation to situations or scenarios which would have motivated such emotions. At issue were, for example, the scream, crying or laughter.<sup>107</sup> At the same time, this field almost completely dispensed with traditional opera singing.<sup>108</sup>

In the 70s, a new mode of singing beyond opera appeared on the scene with the emergence of a new generation of vocal performers. Artists such as Meredith Monk, Joan La Barbara and Laurie Anderson and composers such as Robert Ashley turned to archaic or ritual functions of the voice and song (e.g., storytelling in oral cultures or non-Western singing techniques from cultic contexts). The probing of pop and jazz singing also played a significant role in this newly manifested vocal performance, for example in the music of Pamela Z.

In both cases, the broadening of vocal possibilities went hand in hand with the exploration of the newest technological possibilities, which were opened up by the microphone, and since the 80s by real-time sound processing. While the primacy of traditional opera singing went unbroken in opera houses, independent music theatre intensively delved into these new possibilities. Here particular attention is focussed on the relation between body and voice, that is, on phenomena of the disembodied voice and the tendency inscribed in techniques of audio reproduction to re-embody the voice.<sup>109</sup> Through the vital

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and Sigrid Weigel (eds.), *Zwischen Rauschen und Offenbarung. Zur Kultur- und Medien geschichte der Stimme*, Munich: Akademie, 2002; Matthias Rebstock, 'Drama der Stimmen. Zum Verhältnis von Körper und Stimme in David Martons Wozzeck', in: Stephanie Schroedter (ed.), *Bewegungen zwischen Hören und Sehen. Denkbewegungen über Bewegungskünste*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2012, p. 325ff.

**107** | Reference pieces include *Aventures* und *Nouvelles Aventures* (1962–1965) by György Ligeti, *Anagrama* (1957/1958) by Mauricio Kagel and *Aria* (1958) by John Cage. Cf. Werner Klüppelholz, *Sprache als Musik. Studien zur Vokalkomposition bei Karlheinz Stockhausen, Hans G. Helms, Mauricio Kagel, Dieter Schnebel und György Ligeti*, Friedberg: Pfau, 1976.

**108** | Exploring extremes in vocalism and song did, however, play a role in the field of new opera. For example, Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi refer in this respect to the expanded voice techniques of the English singer Roy Hart and their influence on composers like Peter Maxwell Davies, Hans Werner Henze or Harrison Birtwhistle. Cf. Salzman/Desi, *The New Music Theater*, p. 275.

**109** | Cf. Thomas Macho, 'Stimmen ohne Körper. Anmerkungen zur Technikgeschichte der Stimme', in: Doris Kolesch and Sybille Krämer (eds.), *Stimme*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2006.

role of corporeality and gesture, such performances must inevitably be inclined towards theatre.

The composer and vocal performer Alex Novitz has, for instance, developed a system together with the studio STEIM in Amsterdam that enables him to process his own vocal sounds by using two Wii controllers. Harnessing certain movements, he can sample sounds, loop them through other movements, modulate their pitch, filter them and so forth. He can thus give rise to complex structures on the basis of his own sounds and through a specific repertoire of movements and gestures. In the eyes of the recipient, this exact bond between sound and gesture, between hearing and seeing, remains cryptic in a productive way. For example, in one moment correlations materialise between isolated sounds and sudden jerky movements; in another moment these layers diverge, each developing its own self-determined progression. Here the bodily movements often seem like a peculiar visual music, similar to how the movements of a conductor without an orchestra evoke certain musical events in one's imagination.<sup>110</sup> This visible 'body music' and the music actually emitted by the loudspeakers assume a frictional relation to one another. And finally, the directly generated vocal acts form another, third layer in combination with their own unique corporeality.

Miguel Azguime, composer and director of the miso Ensemble in Lisbon, also uses technical possibilities to project the voice into a theatrical space. In his music theatre piece titled *Salt Itinerary: Für Stimme, live-electronic und multimedia* (2003/06), his point of departure is the hybrid nature of the word: the word is just as much a phonetic form as it is a written character, and thus connects the acoustic with the visual. Azguime himself acts as performer on stage, which is furnished with only a table and chair as well as a large projection surface. He delivers exhaustively musicalised phonetic poems of his own penning, which in turn control the video images on the projection surface, producing in one scene, for instance, an animated landscape of letters that Azguime, as performer, appears to be attacking and that ultimately blanket him completely and 'erase' him. His physical presence vanishes into the thicket of letters he himself initiated, and into a sound cloud that has, thanks to electronics, long since detached itself from the body which had 'conjured' it. Here too, technical feedback blurs the boundaries between cause and effect, action and reaction, physical space and technologically generated spaces.

In addition to both spaces named above, the rediscovery of choristic elements is vital to musicalised, postdramatic theatre. The chorus appears on the scene as an acoustic and visual unit of bodies from which single bodies and voices can step forth, and yet it also suspends voice as expression of individuality, consolidates it into a 'new chorus-voice' uncannily bestowed with a life of its

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**110** | Cf. Dieter Schnebel, 'Nostalgie, Solo für einen Dirigenten' (visible music II), 1962.

own that is neither individual nor even abstractly collective'.<sup>111</sup> Besides the thematic nexus comprised of voice, individuality and (collective) body touched upon here, another point of heightened interest for our context lies in the musicalisation of language, which is part and parcel of choric speaking. As mentioned previously, one can hardly overestimate the influence of Christoph Marthaler's choric theatre on independent music theatre in German-speaking countries. His techniques for musicalising language, his method of building a piece's dramaturgy on musico-compositional, collage-like principles,<sup>112</sup> and the central role played by choral a cappella song all provided a range of ensembles with points from which to embark on their own distinct explorations.<sup>113</sup>

## 2.6 Musician as Performer

In the chapter on working processes, I indicated the shifting of classical role and competency distribution through changes in these processes and through independent-theatre-oriented rehearsal techniques. We see actors who sing, dancers who speak and sing, and musicians who execute more than just musical performance. While opera – and this pertains to a wide array of independent opera productions – typically separates the singer-performers on stage from the instrumental ensembles in the orchestra pit (or rather, in a place outside the stage), independent music theatre often seeks to dissolve this partition. Falk Hübner has developed a systematisation in various forms for how musicians can fulfil other performative functions.<sup>114</sup> On one end of this spectrum stands the theatricalisation of the instrumental music making itself; initially the musicians do nothing more than play their instruments. The effects of a theatricalisation, which takes shape in the eye of the viewer, are created, for instance, by the use of different kinds of instruments, through uncommon playing techniques,<sup>115</sup> through staged parallel actions, and other devices. Furthermore, the range of possibilities includes forms in which musicians carry out additional actions, simple forms for the embodiment of a theatrical role, and finally ends with forms in which performers appear as both actors and singers: Jörg Kienberger or Clemens Sienknecht from the 'Marthaler family', Marie Goyette and Jan Czajkowski from the 'David Marton

**111** | Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*, p. 235, trans. W.W.

**112** | For musical dramaturgy, cf. Roesner, *Musicality in Theatre*, p. 212f.

**113** | E.g., Musiktheater bruit, schindelkilliusdutschke or the ensemble leitundlause.

**114** | F. Hübner, *Shifting Identities*. Hübner's discussion relies here on Michael Kirby's categories between 'not-acting' and 'complex acting'. Cf. Michael Kirby, *A Formalist Theatre*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987.

**115** | Cf. Dieter Schnebel, 'Sichtbare Musik', in: idem., *Anschläge – Ausschläge. Texte zur Neuen Musik*, Munich: Hanser, 1993 (1966), pp. 262–300.

family', Sir Henry at Volksbühne Berlin, Françoise Rivalland or Jean-Pierre Drouet in the milieu around Georges Aperghis, or Martin Hägler in the pieces of Ruedi Häusermann. No boundaries are drawn around intermediate forms. Admittedly, Mauricio Kagel had already systematically explored and played through these possibilities in his 1960s instrumental theatre work.<sup>116</sup> But the novelty today rests in the openness with which musicians and ensembles respond to such performative tasks.

It is also remarkable that a field between music theatre and dance theatre has presented itself thanks to choreographers' having displayed an increasing interest in music making as a procedure of bodily movement.<sup>117</sup> One of the most well-known examples is the project *Movements für Lachenmann* (and later *More Movements für Lachenmann*), which the French choreographer Xavier Le Roy carried out with different musicians of the groups Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin and Klangforum Wien, among others.<sup>118</sup> Für Lachenmann's *Salut für Caudwell*, Le Roy asks two guitarists to perform the movements of the score precisely – but without instruments. The music is then played by two other guitarists behind a black wall, synchronised with the players' lacking instruments.<sup>119</sup> The movements, which are normally only functional and serve to create sound, become the main attraction and a choreography, and allow the musicians' consummate economy and precision of movement sequences internalised over decades to come to the fore and enter into dialogue with Lachenmann's music. Simultaneously, one hears Lachenmann's music in an entirely new way, for one can no longer optically tie the sounds to their acoustic creation, as is normally the case in concerts.

## 2.7 Conceptualisation, Interrogation of Reality, Research

Today, independent dramatic theatre and dance theatre are highly self-referential, and through their work on formats, perceptive patterns and media boundaries, they continually question the conditions under which their own work unfolds. Furthermore, an exceptional interest in working with nonprofessional performers and a tendency towards the documentary and the political have

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**116** | Cf. Matthias Rebstock, *Komposition zwischen Musik und Theater. Das instrumentale Theater von Mauricio Kagel zwischen 1959 und 1965*, Hofheim: Wolke, 2007.

**117** | Cf. here also Petra Sabisch's study in this volume. In chapter 2.5, she refers to the concert as a thematic focus of the sommer.bar, which took place from 2006–2011 in conjunction with Tanz im August.

**118** | In a production of the taschenoper wien, 2005, and of Le Kwatt, Montpellier, 2008, respectively.

**119** | With Gunter Schneider, Barbara Romen, Tom Pauwels and Günther Lebbing.

been noticeable for a decade now.<sup>120</sup> These developments have long since gained ground in municipal and state theatre houses as well, not least because the most influential agents in independent theatre are meanwhile also active there. Many of these agents understand this work as research. In light of debates surrounding artistic research held vehemently in academia since the Bologna reforms, on the one hand, and sociological and science-theoretical discourses on new forms of knowledge, on the other, one can no longer assert that a solely metaphorical parlance is at issue here.<sup>121</sup>

Because opera houses eschew everything except the established repertoire and advocate a doctrine of faithfulness to the original work, new approaches can hardly find room to manoeuvre there, at least not on the main stages.<sup>122</sup> In contrast, independent music theatre offers a whole range of these approaches. The central question here is how the specific thrust of music theatre, namely to work using musical means, can be made productive both conceptually and as a research instrument. In this arena one often encounters methods that refer back to *musique concrète* or to Murray Schafer's soundscape research. A research phase foresees the gathering of concrete sound material, which then serves as the starting point for the compositional work.<sup>123</sup>

The composer Hannes Seidl and the video artist Daniel Kötter have made a name for themselves in recent years with their conceptually structured music theatre productions. In a series of collective works, they engage with everyday life as experienced by specific groups of people and then bring this to the stage.<sup>124</sup> They accompany their subjects' day-to-day lives with a camera and extract the basic material for Seidl's compositions from the video's soundtrack.

**120** | In German-speaking Europe, these contiguities are exemplified by the work of Rimini Protokoll, Gob Squad, She She Pop, God's Entertainment, Hans-Werner Kroesinger or the theatre projects of the International Institute for Political Murder. Cf. also Jan Deck and Angelika Sieburg (ed.), *Politisch Theater machen. Neue Artikulationsformen des Politischen in den darstellenden Künsten*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2011.

**121** | For the discussion on the confluence of the sciences and the arts, see, for instance, Dieter Mersch and Michaela Ott (eds.), *Kunst und Wissenschaft*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2007; Elke Bippus (ed.): *Kunst des Forschens. Praxis eines ästhetischen Denkens*, Zurich: diaphanes, 2009; Martin Tröndle and Julia Warmers (eds.), *Kunstforschung als ästhetische Wissenschaft. Beiträge zur transdisziplinären Hybridisierung von Wissenschaft und Kunst*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2012.

**122** | Many houses lack smaller venues where such approaches could be put to the test. Cf. M. Rebstock, 'Musiktheater. Spielräume schaffen!'.

**123** | Another example can be found in the work of Oper Dynamo West, see 2.2.

**124** | E.g., in *Falsche Freizeit. Elektronische Arbeitsplätze für den Ruhestand*, so-phien-saele, 2010, or in *Falsche Arbeit. 4 konzertante Selbstdarstellungen*, Sommer in Stuttgart festival, 2008.

In *Freizeitspektakel*<sup>125</sup>, however, Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart appear instead of lay performers. Kötter and Seidl accompanied them over the course of one day, from eight o'clock in the morning until eight o'clock in the evening, until the beginning of a concert performance. We see the five singers busy with everyday actions; we see them singing baroque arias – in articulately staged situations; we see how they prepare for a concert, until we arrive at the last film sequence, the moment immediately before the singers take to the stage at eight p.m. Finally, the evening of music theatre is composed of a concert with the five vocal soloists performing Hannes Seidl's music. Directly next to each singer stands his or her corresponding film portrait appearing life-size on an oblong projection surface. That which is visually discrete and runs in parallel becomes linked to the music in that Hannes Seidl takes the films' soundtracks as the point of departure for his vocal compositions, frequently doubling the soundtrack through vocal sounds. We therefore discern a blurring of the borders between the singers' private and public realities, which are visually depicted as largely disconnected.

Whereas Kötter's and Seidl's works are underlain by a documentary, reality-probing stance, the Berlin ensemble *a rose* is, directed by the composer and director Julian Klein, has explicitly resorted to the sphere of artistic research. In 2009, together with Radialsystem V and former members of the Junge Akademie at the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, *a rose* founded the Institut für künstlerische Forschung (*Institute for Artistic Research*). Since then, a number of projects have arisen which were conducted mostly in cooperation with university institutes. The goal is the intermingling of scientific and artistic strategies and the establishment of a mode of research no longer reserved for the sciences alone. In the 2010 project *Do birds tango?* *a rose* cooperated with the behavioural biologist Constance Scharff, director of an interdisciplinary research group at the Freie Universität Berlin dedicated to the topic of birdsong. They collectively developed a music theatre project on the rhythm and emotionality of the zebra finch's song. To this end, several musicians lived for an extended period of time with young zebra finches, raising them and playing musical patterns for them three times daily. From the scientific perspective, these measures were aimed at an experimentation with the birds' behaviours of learning and communication. From the artistic perspective, one could experience a music theatre evening about bird voices, birdsong and the domestic coexistence of humans and animals.



Figure 5: 'Freizeitspektakel', Stuttgart 2010. Photograph: Roberto Bulgrin

## 2.8 Opera as Material

The perception of text works as material, the deconstruction thereof, their hybridisation with other texts or materials, their reconfiguration in new ways – such are some of the many techniques of director's theatre which have long since been implemented in the realm of text-based dramatic theatre. In opera houses, however, even the tiniest intervention in the musical score stirs up fierce controversies and debates surrounding loyalty to the original, debates that are replete, should one be witnessing them from the vantage point of more progressive artforms, with a vastly incomprehensible emotionality, as if to uphold the imperative of hindering a final breach of taboo. There is hardly a more urgent question in the field of opera than that of how we can treat the special cultural legacy these repertoire operas represent, and how we can manage to live up to the demand they address to us, namely that we meet them head on.<sup>126</sup>

The possibility of unrestricted interpretation in the staging and musical rendering of repertoire operas constituted one of independent music theatre's

**126** | And the question becomes that much more pressing when we consider that the innovative impulses emitted since the mid-seventies by director's theatre in the opera of directors such as Hans Neuenfels or Ruth Berghaus are popularly viewed as obsolete or spent. These positions formed the basis for the research project *Zukunft der Oper* (The Future of Opera) conducted by Barbara Beyer at the Kunsthochschule Graz, to name one example. Within this framework, three trailblazing versions of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* were realised. For more on this, see Barbara Beyer, Susanne Kogler and Roman Lemberg (eds.), *Die Zukunft der Oper*, Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2014.

foundational motivations from the start (see 1.3). Even so, this scarcely ventured farther than more or less expansive arrangements. However, when we say that an opera score becomes material – even if the borders cannot be clearly distinguished – we mean to describe an attempt that approaches opera material and composition as a starting point, a referential foil, a field of material; that understands itself, however, as a new composition or a new piece. What is performed is not the operas – however rigorously they are re/arranged – but rather unique creations that engage with and examine operas, similar to the engagements we know from forms of postdramatic theatre or from Frank Castorf's deconstruction of theatre texts. David Marton, who, tellingly, became especially known in the field of postdramatic theatre but does not stage works in opera houses, describes this approach in a nutshell: 'I make theatre, musical theatre, and for this I often use opera material.'<sup>127</sup>

Veenfabriek in Leiden, for example, works with an analogous approach. In their 2010 production *Orfeo naar Monteverdi*, they use madrigals from Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, superimposing them with electronic sounds, minimal music, pop songs and experimental, freely improvised elements. We are not met with a telling of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, but rather with that story's climate of longing, despair and desire. At the centre stands the actor and singer Jeroen Willems, accompanied by an instrumental ensemble. His position in this concert setting is that of the singer, the star and hence that of Orpheus, but he does not embody him; or he at least remains himself at all times, exhibiting his own idiosyncratic brand of hypnotic stage presence.



Figure 6: 'Orfeo naar Monteverdi', Leiden at Scheltemagebouw, 2009. Photograph: Jochem Jurgens

127 | David Marton in *Theater der Zeit* (March 2012): p. 13.

### 3. CONCLUSION

My remarks have striven to open up questions and a range of topics that in my view can be viable tools for an in-depth engagement with independent music theatre in Europe. Such research would have to do justice – more vigorously than I have been able to do here – to all relevant individual theatre-historical and culture-political backgrounds. It would have to concern itself with each background's respective 'culture of independent music theatre', with the existence and consistency of its societal roots, with funding systems and production structures, with the demand brought about by an audience and the structures by which reception and then recirculation into a public discourse are organised. The artistic practices and processes take place within this atmosphere; they arise in reaction to surrounding conditions, which they simultaneously have a hand in forming. Since independent music theatre enjoys a broad-based cultural anchoring in only a few European countries, its future likely lies in international networking and the synthesis of an international perspective.<sup>128</sup> A more detailed, internationally compiled research project on independent music theatre in Europe could make a vital contribution towards such endeavours.

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**128** | The Neuköllner Oper Berlin has already drawn its own conclusions in this regard. With the festivals open op! Europäisches Festival für anderes Musiktheater, 2010, and Move op! Festival für Musiktheater unter prekären Bedingungen, 2013, Neuköllner Oper has set the tone in this regard and has since been continually initiating international coproductions.

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