

From Theaterforschung

## **The New Music Theater: Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body**

Oxford University Press ▶  
By Eric Salzman & Thomas Desi

### Anatomy of a Medium

The first part of the title of this book might have one believe that “The New Music Theater” is a traditional textbook but the second part. “Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body“, suggests a much less conventional approach. The table of contents confirms this impression. The book has four parts structured in a dramaturgical rather than simply methodical way and it is probably accurate to consider the five “entr’actes”, which stand out and bring a subjective, personal and anecdotal dimension to the text, as “intermezzos” in an opera. The book is an essay more than a textbook in spite of its third part and its outstanding historical and geographical survey that has the analytical impetus of Salzman’s “Twentieth Century Music. An Introduction” (1988 ‘new enlarged edition’) which inspired many generations of North American students and certainly remains to this day a precious reference book.

Eric Salzman is American, Thomas Desi, European (Austrian) which has the advantage that, in their common work, the discussion about the evolution of music theater doesn’t get caught in one central perspective. Music theater was exposed in different places to different influences and the authors seem keen to picture this diversity. The first two parts examine the changes that have taken place in music and in theater and these changes are then connected with the evolution of music theater. While the question “Where does it all come from?” is at the core of the discussion in these two first parts, the question “Where does it all go to?” structures the last part of the book. A certain perplexity is obvious on the part of the authors face to face with an object that emerged as a new language out of the ashes of opera and is now threatened by the resurgence of opera.

“What is Music Theater?” ask the authors in the introduction and the question remains very present throughout the later discussion of the variety of its manifestations. Even the minimal answer to the question on page five, that music theater is a form of theater that is “music driven”, is challenged by the authors when they discuss the growing influence of the director in the creative process. Many composers have gone back to writing traditional operas while directors, who sometimes have a musical background, are now discovering music theater from their own new perspective. How then do we define music theater today?

Maybe one can best answer to this question by keeping in mind the political dimension of music theater. Eric Salzman took part early in the Darmstadt *Ferienkurse* which were established just after World War II and soon attracted the attention of young composers and new music theoreticians in Europe and abroad. As Salzman recounts first-hand, the dynamics of the new music scene of the time and its abandonment of the voice, whose emotionality seemed too close to the Wagnerian drunkenness of the Nazis, are very well documented. The discussion of the later interest in abstract forms of musical language, which were thought to be able to restrain this emotionality, is of great interest. What is at stake in this analysis is the importance of the idea of experimentation which has, as such, become part of what European music theatre is. The experiments of American composers, although more integrated in their works, also strove for a new synthesis of music and theater that was intended to be the expression of a new world and a new morality.

It is certainly not a coincidence that 46 pages are devoted to the discussion of the role of the voice and 60 to that of narrative strategies that belong to the theater. Music theater emerged from the ruins of World War II without the voice and voice remained a problem in Europe. Isolated experiments have taken place but most composers who have experimented extensively with the voice are American. The expression “extended voice singing” doesn’t have a German equivalent. A new dramaturgical complexity and the fact that the director rather than the composer is in control of the creative process are the main factors of change in European music theater.

The questions asked in the last chapter of the book deconstruct music theater as if the authors have been playing a game by telling that reader that he has all elements in hand but then asking him to put them together in his own way. Traditionally opera is on the side of power. How can music theater be a voice that defies power today? Is there an idea in the medium itself that could lay the foundation for a radically new development? The title of this last part of this book is "Taking it apart". If new music theater is to continue to exist – and the authors don't question the fact that it should and will – than we, the readers, must pick up the argumentation and carry it on. "The New Music Theater" is a wise and thoughtful book that one should leave open after reading the last page.

--Isabelle McEwen