

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

By Eric Salzman and Thomas Dési

Introduction: What Is Music Theater?

What is music theater? Since this usage, although known in various European languages, is relatively new in English, the question has been posed in various ways.

Opera is an abbreviated form of a still-current Italian expression, *opera lirica*, which can be translated as “lyric work” or “works that are sung” (*opera* itself being the plural of *opus*, the Latin word for “work”). The term has been used to represent many “classical” forms of sung theater, even when the connections to European opera are slight (hence “Chinese opera” or “Peking opera”). By extension, popular theatrical forms containing music (some of them older than opera itself) have come to be designated as operetta (or “little opera”), light opera, comic opera, *opéra comique*, or *opéra bouffe*, all variable and somewhat awkward expressions that try to marry terms for relatively small-scale popular or comic (i.e., nontragic) art with a word whose historically developed character is closely connected with notions of “big” and “grand.”

In fact, the term *opera* itself has sometimes inspired doubts among composers and librettists. Reformers and innovators of serious opera as well as the creators of popular forms have often preferred to use other terms such as *musical comedy*, *the musical*, *Singspiel*, *dramma per musica*, *favola in musica*, *dramma giocosa*, *pastorale* and *lyric drama*, all terms from which the word *opera* is missing. Wagner, who associated “opera” with Meyerbeer and the Italians, referred to his work as “music drama.” Bertolt Brecht, who disliked opera and wanted to draw on the popularity of musical theater, invented new terms for his works and essentially broke with Kurt Weill over the operatic dimensions of *Mahagonny*.¹

New music theater was created outside these categories. It absorbed the musical and artistic revolutions of the early twentieth century as well as the technological innovations of stagecraft and stage design, machinery and light, audio and video. When we say that the new music theater is distinguished by innovation and revolution, we do not mean to imply that everything was reinvented simultaneously. Some aspects (say, the standard pit orchestra) might be retained but others (for example, singing style, subject matter, or text) might be quite new. Some works might still fit the operatic model because they use operatic voices or because they integrate well into the standardized process of operatic production. But a good deal of music theater (or even small-scale opera) rejects the grandeur of grand opera for many reasons including economics, the preference for nonprojected voices (extended voice, pop, non-European styles or other kinds of singing that need to be amplified), a desire for audience immediacy, or a general esthetic or philosophical preference for small-scale, unpretentious, small-theater work—closer in many ways to contemporary dance, dance theater, new theater and new performance art than to traditional opera. Small voices and small budgets require a small theater concept, a small theater, a small ensemble, and, probably, amplification. These needs combine with esthetic preferences to produce the kind of piece that works well in a small theater but which is difficult, if not impossible, for a large opera house or company to swallow.

Nevertheless, some terminological problems seem unavoidable. In English, “music theater” is essentially a coinage taken from the Germanic form *Musiktheater*, which can refer to a building but which also came to designate a kind of instrumental or instrumental/vocal avant-garde performance associated with composers like Karlheinz Stockhausen and Mauricio Kagel. In the English-speaking world, it was first applied to small-scale sung theater in the Brecht or Brecht/Weill tradition but it has been widely appropriated for almost any kind of serious musical theater. Hardly anyone on Broadway or in London’s West End uses the term *musical comedy* anymore, and ambitious modern musicals with a pretense to do more than merely entertain are as likely to be designated “music theater” as anything else.

Music Theater or opera? Exclusive or inclusive?

In short, “music theater” has come to have two opposing uses: one inclusive, the other particular and exclusive. The inclusive meaning of the term can encompass the entire universe of performance in which music and theater play complementary and potentially equal roles. In this sense, *opera* can be viewed as a particular and historical form of music theater. Music videos, to choose a radically different example, might be another.

However, when we say *new music theater* in this book, we use the term in a way that is almost always meant to exclude traditional opera, operetta, and musicals. This meaning is partly historical but mostly categorical. New music theater can be compared to modern dance and it is in an evolutionary place that is close to where modern dance was in the mid-twentieth century. In other contexts, it has sometimes been designated as fringe or experimental opera or even as the off-Broadway of opera. Since it is in mid-evolution and comprises different streams and styles, it is most easily defined by what it is not: not-opera and not-musical. A slightly less negative definition would describe it as the wide and evolving territory that lies between opera and the musical. Music theater is theater that is musicdriven (i.e., decisively linked to musical timing and organization) where, at the very least, music, language, vocalization, and physical movement exist, interact, or stand side by side in some kind of equality but performed by different performers and in a different social ambiance than works normally categorized as operas (performed by opera singers in opera houses) or musicals (performed by theater singers in “legitimate” theaters).

Does the archetype hold in all forms from the most traditional to the most contemporary?

What if a work or a performance requires a mixed cast of singers? What happens when a musical is performed in an opera house or an opera appears on Broadway? The movement from

theater to opera house is a kind of appropriation and institutionalization of works that might have had quite different origins and even different meanings at an earlier stage of their existence. Without any viable in-between, a work that began as a literary or theatrical protest may be appropriated to represent something very different in the opera house. Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* started life as a *Singspiel* or musical comedy—a mixture of slapstick and occult symbolism—and retains its original number form with spoken dialogue even in the opera house. Bizet's *Carmen* was originally a serious *opéra comique* with spoken dialogue but after the composer's death, recitatives were added to obtain its acceptance in the opera house; although various attempts have been made to recapture the work as music theater, the operatic version with recitatives is almost universally performed. *Parsifal* was written as a festival music drama and was not supposed to be performed anywhere except in the Bayreuth *Festspielhaus*; today, like all the Wagnerian music dramas, it is "just" opera (its origins are revealed only by the tradition that—in certain houses at least—applause and curtain calls take place only after the secular second act). Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* started life as serious musical theater but has turned into an opera and had to be recaptured for the theater in the form of a post-Brechtian music-theater style production in which the actors play musical instruments (and, with revisions, has now turned into a decidedly non-operatic musical film). As already mentioned, the argument over whether *Mahagonny* was to be an opera or not was a major cause of the breakup of the Weill/Brecht collaboration (they collaborated only once more afterward); history seems to have decided definitively that it is indeed an opera.

Are we just arguing semantics here? Evidently, contemporary opera, music theater in its various forms, and the modern musical coexist on a continuum and the lines between them are often blurred. But even though the boundaries between species are often fuzzy (an inevitable result of any evolutionary process), this does not mean that valid species do not exist (they clearly do) and should not lead us to deny that differences exist—differences of purpose, of category, of social setting, of casting, and of vocal type.

A recurrent theme throughout this book is the question of what music theater has been, is or might be. We often return to early or non-Western forms of music theater and performance art, not in an attempt to prove that new music theater is merely a return to origins but rather to find universals, untainted perhaps by the recent domination of traditional Western forms. We also sketch the largely unwritten and shadowy history of “alternate opera” going at least as far back as the period between the two world wars as well as the second and third waves of the 1960s and the 1980s to the present. In all these periods, new forms of music theater were proposed—initially at least—as a protest against opera or a conscious attempt to create new musico-theatrical forms outside the physical and esthetic precincts of opera.² Music theater has a difficult but inspiring past whose story is still being written; it is also still evolving, not to say constantly redefining itself.

Music Theater is the oldest and newest of theater forms

If you go far enough in any direction, historically or culturally, you eventually arrive at some form of theater based in music and dance. The origins of theater in ritual, religion, and myth have been extensively explored and surviving examples can be cited from many cultures.³ Given the antiquity and ubiquity of these forms, it can be said that singing accompanied by physical movement is at the base of the performing arts family tree. At some unknown point, language—ritualistic or storytelling—is added to the mix. As music-plus-text seems to be stored in a different area of the brain than words alone, the combination of the two facilitates the memorization of extended passages of text. Thus, religious texts are chanted in virtually all cultures and extended poetic and dramatic texts almost as universally. The separation of spoken and sung theater (and of dance) was an achievement of Renaissance Europe and is recent in other cultures as well.

Opera (the classical European form of nonreligious sung theater) was invented only in the seventeenth century⁴ and ballet, in its modern form as a truly separate art form, only in the nineteenth. Modern spoken theater has its roots in the sixteenth century and came to dominate all but the most popular forms of theater only in relatively recent times.

As opera established its independence from religious ritual, from spoken theater, and from other presentational forms using accompanied song, it began to spread outside of Italy and take on a special role—that of representing the wealth and the accomplishments of the sponsoring court, town, or society. As a form of “conspicuous consumption,” it tended to grow to maximum dimensions in length, scope, size of performing forces, and, of course, cost. The use of a wide and deep frontal stage with a large orchestra pit beneath and the development of certain types of dramaturgy and subject matter all contributed to its growth as a large form. Serious opera also deals with large-scale subjects and emotions. It is often “over the top” musically and vocally, and it typically deals with violence and violent emotions stylized in musical form. As was the case with Greek tragedy, opera is allowed to show antisocial behavior, taboos, and bloodshed as well as the extreme emotions that accompany them. Thus it has a cathartic function in which the omnipresence of music becomes an essential feature.

In spite of the fact that opera trades in extremes, it deals with them in a highly controlled manner. Serious opera—expensive, elaborate, traditionally dealing with larger than life characters—has always been a highly subsidized, aristocratic art form, closely associated with the status quo of society. Its protagonists are rulers and heroes in a society in which rule and order are threatened by extraordinary events and out-of-control passions.⁵ These cautionary tales, the expensive form of their presentation as well as the social institution itself, all reflect conservative tendencies, which from time to time have provoked periodic renovations and reforms. These have had the aim of keeping opera from losing its central place in artistic life, allowing it to hold on to (or helping it restore) its ability to function dramatically and speak a more contemporary language to the society in which it must function. These changes have come

about through aggressive programs of reform (Gluck, Wagner) or through the infusion of popular forms into the serious opera house (the various manifestations of comic opera or *opera buffa* which have popular origins and are generally concerned with issues of class, gender, and social structure).

By the mid-twentieth century, however, due perhaps to the impact of mass media (notably film),⁶ opera seems to have lost its keystone position at the apex of the arts. The much-discussed “crisis of opera” is sometimes dated to the period just after World War I and the political and economic upheavals that followed: 1924 is the year of Puccini’s and Lenin’s death and the year that Berg’s *Wozzeck* appeared; it is also only a few years before the economic crash of 1929 and the appearance of sound film. Others put the crisis point a quarter of a century later, just after World War II.

The twentieth century developed into an age of specialization. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* of late romanticism was once more teased apart. In classical Aristotelian theory, art was believed to derive from the imitation of the real world. Music, notably instrumental music, challenges that view. Under the influence of German idealistic philosophy, music came to be viewed as the purest of the arts and a model for all the arts precisely because it is presumably the most abstract and the least contaminated by the “real world” or by everyday life. This idea comes to the fore once music’s ancient connections with language and storytelling have been severed. The classical tradition, with its fugues and sonata forms, appears as a veritable fairyland of Platonic ideals. In this universe, now dominated by atonal and nonfigurative art, instrumental music seems more important than vocal music and concert performance is accorded a much higher status than the theater. Wagner once remarked that having created the invisible orchestra, he now had to invent the invisible theater. The rift between new music and the old operatic theater—culminating in Boulez’s 1963 interview in *Der Spiegel* in which he suggested that “the most elegant solution would be to explode the opera houses”—appeared to be unbridgeable. The

utopian reinvention of postwar society seemed to be possible through an enlightened modernism within which opera was not seen to play a role.

The most significant challenge to this view—that the highest forms of art were the most abstract—came from artists involved with the political left; these included Stalinist and Maoist cultural commissars in the communist world but also Bertolt Brecht, his various collaborators, and a later generation of intellectual populists. Brecht, Kurt Weill, and their followers (Eisler and Dessau in Europe; Blitzstein, Bernstein, and Sondheim in America) went to the place where the music-theater ideal still remained strong: the popular theater of operettas, *operas bouffes*, musicals, vaudevilles, and music hall entertainments. The so-called *Zeitoper* and its theatrical counterparts (Brecht coined the terms *Songspiel* and *Lehrstück*; sometimes other terms such as *theater opera* or *opera for actors* are used) were “anti-opera” operas that traded on the political and social issues of the day.⁷ These ideas returned after 1968 when political and artistic avant-gardism merged with a new and serious interest in popular forms and also in non-Western art. The appearance of performance and concept art, the new tonalities of the minimalists, and a broad expansion of the idea of vocalism all set the stage for the development of a new music theater in the final decades of the twentieth century.

The conflict between the Aristotelian notion of music as mimetic and the Platonic purity of music in idealized and nonrepresentational forms had to be abandoned (or reconciled) before the new music theater could develop. A more useful dialectic might be found in the contrast between the biological nature of music (primarily as sexual behavior) and its scientific or mathematical/Pythagorean character. Music theater cannot avoid these conflicts. It is obliged to combine the kind of mimesis routinely found in the visual and performing arts with the nonmimetic “science” of music just as it may also combine the notion of sexual behavior—as found in popular and world musics everywhere—with the old idea that music can tell its stories.

This last turn of the wheel brings us to the subject matter of this volume. Every revolution revolves through a 360° cycle and reaches its starting position but always further

down the road. The revival of music theater was the return of something older than opera itself but also something quite new. It happened in many places, often at the same time, sometimes without conscious collusion, sometimes with an explicit exchange of ideas and influences.

Further Reading

Boulez, Pierre. Interview in *Der Spiegel* 40 (1967): 166–174. In this interview, Boulez also mentioned plans to write an opera himself—which he never did.

Wagner, Richard. *Oper und Drama*. 1852. Translated into English by William Ashton Ellis.

1893. {AU: Please give city London }It was called “the book of books about music” by the other operatic Richard—Richard Strauss—and it sums up musical romanticism and shows Wagner’s own philosophical conceptions of a new music theater.</REF>

Notes

1. On the other hand, the word *opera* has sometimes been used to designate forms of theater that are remote from the traditional meaning. Perhaps the most extreme examples of this are the early Robert Wilson works, which were called operas even though they contained no music at all; they were “operatic” only in their scope and extreme length.

2. But in spite of occasional proletarian pretensions, generally revealing itself as an art form for the upper levels of society.

3. The still-visible theater of Priene in the Gulf of Milet in Greece dates from 400 B.C. Greek theater evolved from choral dancing as part of religious rites for the God Dionysius.

4. The first recitative operas were privately performed in Florence in 1598, 1600, and 1602. Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, the earliest opera still regularly performed, appeared in Mantua in

1607. The first major public theaters built to accommodate opera were opened in Rome and Venice in the 1630s.

5. Unlike the original Greek tragedy, the status quo is usually preserved in opera through the intervention of a kindly monarch or a benevolent god—the deus ex machina leading to the happy end.

6. The notion that cinema came to fill the place in the twentieth century that opera occupied in the nineteenth has been proposed by a number of critics since the advent of the sound film at the end of the 1920s.

7. Roman Haubenstock-Ramati's *Comedy* is actually subtitled "Anti-Opera." Luciano Berio's *Opera* and the John Cage *Europeras* are in effect meta-operas, in effect a whole subgenre self-reflexive of contemporary opera.