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Claiming music for the theatre

ABOUT DEFINITIONS BETWEEN CULTURAL POLICY AND ARTISTIC FORMS

Pieter Verstraete

It would not be entirely appropriate to claim that music theatre has defined itself independently from theatre and opera. Whoever takes a glance at music theatre in Flanders will immediately notice a rich variety of cross-over forms, some inclining towards theatre, others towards opera. In fact, the diversity is so striking that it would appear as if music theatre escapes definition.

However, music theatre has struggled long to legitimize itself by means of a definition that opposes it to certain text-based theatre and opera traditions. As an international phenomenon it has been referred to as 'new' or 'small-scale music theatre', as opposed to large-scale opera. This 'small-scale' label, which music theatre took on in its underdog position during the 1980s, now seems to dissolve increasingly among continuously growing music theatre ensembles such as LOD (since 1989), Muziektheater Transparant (1994), and in between, Walpurgis (1989). One of the effects of this growth was an increased awareness of institutionalization and internationalization. The question is what this development's impact on future cultural policies will be, and how the smaller local music theatre companies will respond to this in their search of an identity.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In addition to the numerous small, subsidized music theatre companies, 2009 will mark the arrival of two new major players: Musical van Vlaanderen (Musical of Flanders), a new company established by Geert Allaert, known from numerous previous efforts to position himself in the music theatrical landscape, and Service to Others (now known as 'Het Verbond'), a company set up by booming 'theatre animal' and filmmaker Wayn Traub. The question can be raised to which extent these organizations can still be called 'music theatre companies'. The systematic broadening of the definitions and the current subsidy policy appear to be putting the dearly won identity of Flemish music theatre again at stake. The funds required for a continued growth will constantly decrease and the landscape is getting saturated. After well over twenty years Flemish music theatre now appears to have reached a point in history at which it tends to consolidate its working methods, resources and artistic views. The call for singularity is, therefore, more crucial than ever. In view of the latest subsidy decisions, it is high time to critically reconsider the struggle for self-definition and legitimization.

For a better understanding of this struggle for self-definition, the historical perspective will be helpful to situate the logic and the need of an identity within the evolution of the artistic landscape. Such historical survey remains yet to be written, and may prove difficult to achieve considering the heterogeneity of the music theatre landscape itself. Music theatre is in constant motion. I will, therefore, try to instigate the historical perspective. The struggle for a self-definition is characterized by two types of definition. On the one hand, there are the definitions that present themselves after some time on the basis of the occurrence of similarities with recognizable theatre forms, genres and styles. Definitions of this kind take shape in relation to a certain cultural

awareness and aesthetic views about the role of music in the theatre. On the other hand, the different music theatre concepts have a common interest when it comes to self-definition or re-definition: they share the desire to institutionalize in view of the government's subsidy policy. It is this historical field of tension that will allow us to look at the future.

IMPACT OF THE THEATRE

Unlike the budget situation of the early 1990s, the available financial resources today seem sufficient more than ever. During the last decade, music theatre definitely ceased to be a starvation art practised by obscure composers in the wings of the theatre and opera. The 1993 Performing Arts Decree (Podiumkunstendecreet) recognized music theatre as an independent theatre form. But now the battle for music theatre seems won and its right of existence acknowledged, the landscape threatens to saturate and the dearly won identity to be lost. As a result, the call for singularity has, again, become very expedient, and there are, at least, two reasons for this.

First of all, 'post-dramatic theatre' (as described by Hans-Thies Lehmann) has caused the theatre to become increasingly musical and sound-aware as well as multimedia and interdisciplinary – resulting in new forms of 'total theatre'. As a result, the artistic boundaries of music theatre, as well as opera, have shifted towards theatre. In this way, post-dramatic theatre has indirectly affected the staging practice of both music theatre and opera. The shift 'from opera to theatre', launched during the 1980s by Gerard Mortier at the Royal Monnaie (De Munt/La Monnaie), can be regarded as an exponent of this tendency. Still, commissions for composers who wanted to experiment with music theatre in opera remained scarce. Post-dramatic theatre's effects were more noticeable

on the level of opera stage design, staging and acting style, that viewed to activate the spectator. It undoubtedly also affected opera programming, creating opportunities for 20th-century and contemporary composers (Alban Berg, Benjamin Britten, Leoš Janáček, and, in Flanders, Boudewijn Buckinx, Karel Goeyvaerts and Wim Henderickx), but also for more innovative staging of the opera canon by theatre directors such as Jan Fabre, Gerardjan Rijnders, Ivo van Hove and Johan Simons.

In fact, you might just as well claim that music theatre and theatre evolved similarly, in the sense that both were in search of new forms of theatrical communication. The past couple of years, an aesthetic strategy giving music, sound design and audio technology a more prominent place on the stage could be noted. Only now can we analyze to what extent the numerous music theatre performances have had an impact on the development of the post-dramatic theatre idiom.

Secondly, as a result of its continuing struggle for self-definition, music theatre has, throughout the last decade, expanded to an extent that now might turn against its own right to exist. Either formally, or geographically, an increasing number of small-scale companies have adopted a music theatre profile as a specific segment of the cultural landscape. The formal diversity has resulted in a productive confusion about what music theatre is. This confusion is intensified by the transition of text theatre into multisensory theatre or, to be more specific, into a 'theatre of the ear', as in the many performances with text and soundscapes by Braakland/ZeBilding after 1998. Furthermore, music theatre found its way to children's theatre, with a certain amount of overlap as a result: Figurentheater De Spiegel (1993) as well as Kunsthuis Pantalone (1999) both aim at a very youthful audience, including infants less than three or even not-yet-born. The interest in the latter target group, apart from the therapeutic and emancipatory intentions, could be read as a statement about the future of music theatre itself.

The expansion of music theatre from within the theatre, with Wayn Traub's ensemble's plans to settle in Limburg (Hasselt) as the most recent example, will surely be beneficial for geographical diversity in music theatre as well as for its cooperation with theatre. Still, in the long run, the expansion could also endanger the continuity and means of existence of the smaller companies. The odds are that new financial constructions will have to be found, as has been pointed out during recent debates on commercial sponsorship in the theatre sector. But, then again, the variety of ground-breaking forms of music theatre guarantees a high degree of self-reflection. The interference of the profit sector, which for the musical has always been a necessity, would stand in the way of self-reflection.

DEFINING BY NEGATION

Historically, multiform and expanding definitions have always been part of music theatre. For that matter, the fear that appropriation by the theatre and subsidies for the musical represent a threat to the singularity of music theatre is historically justified. Music theatre in Flanders as we know it today, is not merely the result of a re-theatricalization of music, which also took place in the opera: it was also part of a 'musicalization' of the theatre – internationally described as 'post-dramatic theatre'. Music theatre inevitably presented itself as a countermove against antiquated or obsolete theatre models, breaking down classic music composition and performance models on the one hand, and opposing traditional principles of representation in dramatic theatre on the other.

In fact, appropriation by the theatre was there from the beginning, be it in a negative sense, to create a new form of eclectic theatre that incorporates musical and theatrical means in a

new relation or constellation. The connections often arise from the tension between old and new, theatrical action and concert staging, word and music, etc. In this way, music theatre explores theatrical forms beyond the Wagnerian 'Wort-Ton Drama' idea of total theatre. The latter had become a model for a certain music drama tradition and is now still often considered the standard for opera. In itself, Wagner's opera model actually was a revolution in 19th-century opera. After the Wagnerian model grew antiquated, partly as a result of ideological considerations after WW II, 20th-century music theatre increasingly went in search of more direct interaction with the audience and the individual spectator, which could indirectly be understood in a socio-political sense. This quest often produced an emancipatory effect: the totality does not exist outside the spectator's own, subjective experience. Meanings are no longer imposed by a master-genius. The spectator is compelled to become aware that he is responsible for his own experience and for the meaningful associations he is making. In essence, this approach is not any different from contemporary theatre.

The present tendency is that an increasing number of small-scale music theatre initiatives are putting the boundaries of the theatre under pressure by making alliances with installation art, visual art, modern dance, site-specific theatre, and new electro-acoustic technologies and interfaces. The intensified interaction with the audience and the often consequential additional cost raise the question whether the theatre's (re-)appropriation has not become imperative. In that case, the influence of the theatre is a matter of logistics. But co-operation with the theatre – from which it has largely originated – and the mutual influences will be beneficial for music theatre. LOD, Muziektheater Transparant and Walpurgis play a pioneering role in that process: for quite some time now, their working strategies have been based on collaboration between composers, theatre directors, choreographers and

stage designers, all of whom commit themselves to music and opera and to theatre alike.

It is important to bear in mind that the current music theatre landscape does not begin with LOD, which began some twenty years ago as a series of innovative lunch concerts under the heading 'Lunch On Thursday' (Lunch Op Donderdag, the abbreviation of which would become the organization's name). Nor did music theatre begin in the 1950s, with the first chamber operas by what was then called 'Chamber Opera Transparant' (Kameropera Transparant), nor with the individuals who during in the 1960s and 70s deliberately decided to break down the boundaries of institutionalized opera. Music theatre has a much longer history of reformations, re-definitions and breaks with the past. It has always been under development, which is emblematic for its uncertain genesis. In the 20th century, however, we do note an accelerating development of music theatre forms, causing cultural policy to lag behind. This acceleration is also basically an international phenomenon in western art music, including the ground-breaking efforts by Luciano Berio, Cathy Berberian, John Cage, Philip Glass, Alexander Goehr, Hans Werner Henze, Maurizio Kagel, Georges Aperghis, Luigi Nono or Peter Maxwell Davies. The impulse, however, was not only given by composers. As a result of a plethora of artistic and especially personal trajectories, it has become rather difficult to capture music theatre in one single definition.

DEFINITIONS AT RISK

The diversity of forms, styles and genres historically caused general confusion about music theatre, which nourished the struggle for a definition. The necessity of a definition to secure the right to exist and the distinctiveness of music theatre is felt somewhat

different when it comes to subsidies. As a result, two overall approaches towards a definition have emerged. In the first, music theatre is generally defined negatively, as mentioned above: music theatre is *not* text-based theatre and *not* opera. The second is diametrically opposed to the first: it suggests that the term 'music theatre' is an 'umbrella term' designating all subgenres, including musical, opera, operetta, chamber opera and all sorts of experimental mixtures of theatre and stage concert.

In the first, negative definition, the term 'music theatre' involves the last group of experimental cross-over forms which escape strict definitions. This type of music theatre fought the battle for a definition mainly to make itself known and to obtain a separate place in subsidy policies. Aesthetically, music theatre moves more intuitively through formal experiments between different productions, with interrelations which are perceived sooner by the makers themselves.

The second – all-embracing – definition caused even more confusion. So far, we have had a fairly clear idea of what opera, operetta or musical is, as these forms have a clearly delineated stage history and because they were thoroughly institutionalized. Experiments with these older, music dramatic idioms, however, have raised a general awareness of their heterogeneity. The opera scene used the term 'music theatre' in and out of season to invigorate itself. With my students in Amsterdam, I often illustrate this with the example of the Dutch Opera, which renamed itself 'Het Muziektheater' on the occasion of the opening of the new opera venue near the Amstel in Amsterdam. In a counter reaction, the state-funded opera institute appropriated the term to 'rejuvenate' itself – or rather, to claim a younger profile – in the changing landscape.

In the early days of the amendments to the 1993 Performing Arts Decree, opera, operetta, musical and other multidisciplinary artistic expressions were included in the definition of music

theatre. This definition gradually became more concrete, until in 2003 (and later in the 2006-7 advisory committee's introductory notes) it was decided that the main criterion would be that music theatre organizations 'primarily engage in initiatives in which music, mostly performed live, is combined with theatrical forms.' The advisory committee went on to define the theatrical aspect in terms of 'the living presence of performers, actors and/or singers, who are responsible for the dramatic action'. A recent performance by the German music theatre maker Heiner Goebbels, *Stifters Dinge*, even challenges this last notion: all music was reproduced by musical robots in a giant installation of tubes, valves, membranes, prepared pianos, etc. Similar experiments can be noted in Flanders in the radical performances by, among others, Godfried-Willem Raes and Moniek Darge in the alternative experimental music circuit of the Ghent-based Logos Foundation. Subsidized music theatre companies are, for that matter, more frequently trying to establish synergies with new, possibly interactive music and sound technologies.

As a result of the explosion of multimedia and new multidisciplinary forms of music theatre, it has become extremely difficult for an advisory committee to apply an ultimate definition as a standard. The problem is becoming even more complicated because experimental music has developed into a complex knot of styles and composition techniques, in which the tone is no longer set by one single avant-garde. Music theatres nowadays are junctions where individual artist trajectories come together, where boundless eclecticism goes hand in hand with formal experiment and the search for new sonic textures, sounds and technologies. Because the structurally subsidized companies have little budget available for experiment, project grants are vitally important to maintain music theatre's laboratory function.

PRODUCTIVE AMBIGUITY

All things considered, the battle for a new sound in the theatre that feverishly broke out at the end of the 1980s, can be said to have been successful. Numerous radical experiments have preceded the current music theatre companies, with even a series of operas for the Belgian radio and television way before Bob Ashley's so-called television operas in the US in the 1980s. Today, Flemish music theatre is an unprecedented breeding ground thanks to successful definition policies. The vagueness and confusion surrounding its definition has procured a productive gap that is presently stopped by at least nine government supported companies and various small initiatives. The only invariable thing in music theatre is, perhaps, that it has become an organization model that offers a refuge to experimental and somewhat more difficult theatre that thinks and operates through music.

Historically speaking, this productive ambiguity has been around since the evolution of the 16th-century *dramma per musica* [or even earlier] up to the 19th and 20th-century music drama boom. As a music theatre genre in the broadest definition, musical too has made its claims on music and the singing voice, despite its more advanced institutionalization and definition. In the debate, the musical fences with its social function by comparing it to 19th-century Italian belcanto-opera. In spite of the historical misconception, which is based on an intentionally reduced notion, the argument serves the purpose of a similar productive ambiguity in the expansion of definitions, as well as in the repeated negation of the alleged 'old' opera model. This vagueness is meant to nourish the need to anchor musical more firmly in Flemish cultural policy. The desire also remains to perpetuate the musical as an institution through mature tuition of multi-talented performing artists. As a result, the musical has got stuck in the same urge for emancipation as music theatre about twenty years ago. But con-

sidering its dependence on commercial strategies, the question remains whether an experimental musical scene will be capable of creating comparable historical awareness and self-reflection as music theatre did.

THE FUTURE OF MUSIC THEATRE

As a result of the ongoing self-legitimization through different, uncompromising artistic trajectories, project-based formal experiments and innovative forms of collaboration, the roads are open more than ever before. Thanks to a successful definition policy, certain notions of the meaning of music theatre have begun to live their own lives in cultural policy. The confusion of definitions perpetuates the need of more financial resources. Conversely, we are slowly reaching a point at which it is possible to define constant indicators, and at which cautious institutionalisation of music theatre is becoming plausible. But for bona fide, formal definitions the landscape is still too much in motion.

One side-effect of the definition policy is that the major music theatre houses will focus more on self-preservation. These houses have taken up the distinct role of offering growth trajectories to artists in residence (such as Dick Van der Harst, Jan Kuijken, Dominique Pauwels and Kris Defoort at LOD; Wim Henderickx, Peter Maxwell Davies, Jan Van Outryve and Eric Sleichim at Muziektheater Transparant). The major advantage is that companies can guarantee sufficient time and means to develop new productions, as music theatre requires a relatively long production time, as well as ample rehearsal time and space for musicians, singers and actors. On the other hand, the system has the setback of privileging the means for an elite of composers and performing artists over a long period, even though they have proven their artistic worth and merits in the development of

music theatre. As a result, LOD will prefer to work in trajectories in order to be able to respond to the increasingly complex cultural reality more sufficiently.

It is promising that the major companies have not only established an ongoing internationalization and a solid reputation of their composers; they have also developed structures and collaborative associations that make it interesting to offer short-term opportunities to new creators. Collaboration with the opera is becoming reality, also internationally, even though structural funds are still lacking. The 'Orpheic' desire for the idiom of opera, which music theatre has long resisted, is winking at the moment when music theatre is seeking to perpetuate and consolidate its definition. An increasing number of composers venture demanding 'operas', either in new hybrid forms with other musical idioms (with Kris Defoort's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* as a successful prototype), or in alternative interdisciplinary forms that question the theatrical experience, such as Wayn Traub's notorious 'cinema-operas'.

Institutionalization and self-preservation are at odds with the original struggle for definition that is so closely connected to music theatre as a cultural phenomenon. In that case, one of music theatre's major challenges ahead will be fairly predictable. It is up to a new generation to *oppose* opera, to *oppose* post-dramatic theatre and very likely also to *oppose* the music theatre that is discussed here. History teaches that such resistance movements are necessary to maintain continuity. Music theatre is such a flexible phenomenon that it will continue to seek new formal and substantial expressions in relation to the culture in which it operates. It is this field of tension between theatre, opera and musical that gives music theatre its resilience and right to exist.

Music theatre incessantly breathes and moves, *with* and *against* the currents of the dominant culture. At times it inflates its definition and then deflates it again, just like the opening and closing of a lung, like Dick van der Harst's bandoneon.

FOR FURTHER READING

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