

Music and Theatre, Music ás Theatre

We can observe a clear trend in combining music with other means with the aim of attracting a broader or younger audience for classical music, for instance. This gives us enough reason for a critical observation of this trend. Why don't we let Music speak for itself? Is music alone not beautiful enough?

Today we will see many highly interesting artists who in some way or another combine music with theatrical elements. And all of them are by origin musicians, instrumentalists, composer.

There is of course a large corpus of studies on 'music ánd theatre', opera, operette, musical etc. There are less studies on 'music theatre' and even less on 'music ás theatre' and the theatricality of a performance.

But times are changing: It seems that musicologists of today are no longer fixated on the alleged objective score, on objective 'notes' or objective historical data from the past: The performance of music is today also a subject of research and we speak in this context of "performativity".

Let me try to focus on some elements that seem to me important as a start.

First I will comment once again on the concept of the autonomy of music, secondly I will reflect on the Body in the Music, and finally I want to show you some examples of Music ás Theatre.

The question of the autonomy of music:

Why don't we let Music speak for itself? Is music alone not beautiful enough? And do theatrical elements not distract us from the music? After all, isn't 'real' music autonomous??

This question concerning the meaning of music is a vexing one due to the reputed abstraction of music: the nineteenth century concept of so-called Absolute Music retains a crippling influence on the discussion over the meaning of music.

The English philosopher Aaron Ridley¹ invented a term to describe this persistent idea from the nineteenth century about especially classical music: 'Automania'.

A kind of sickness(?) to persist in believing that music stands on its own, to believe that music is a pure manifestation of 'Der Absoluten Geist', 'The Absolute Spirit'.

To cite Aaron Ridley:

"There is something very odd, after all, about the way in which so much philosophy of music has so often been done. To try to isolate music entirely, to try to leech or prise out of it its context-laden character, and indeed the very nature of one's own context-laden engagement with it, is rather like trying to pretend that music had come from Mars – that it had suddenly appeared from nowhere, a perfectly formed but wholly mysterious phenomenon."²

¹ Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music, Theme and Variations*, Edinburgh Un.Press 2004

² ib. page 3

Now if music is a manifestation of pure spirit it is clear that the Body should not distract us from this higher manifestation. So that possibly explains why Isaac Stern asked Janine Jansen during a masterclass “not to move so much, because it distracts us from the music”. Where then is “The Music” if it is not in the Body of the Performer? Is it in the Mind? Do we still believe today the Descartes-concept of Body and Mind as two separate entities? Why perform music any longer live on stage if we can more easily listen to it on CD or i-Pod without being distracted by the look of the performer?

In a recent publication “Psychology for Musicians”³ we read:

“Results of studies suggest the following:

1.

What an audience sees in a live performance can heavily influence what it hears. A performer’s physical appearance and stage behaviour can affect listeners’s judgments of the musical quality produced.

2.

Musician’s bodily movements while performing have important communicative purposes. The most notable gestures often occur at key expressive moments in the music and can be more effective than sound for informing an audience about a performer’s emotional intent.”

This is probably the moment to quote Mauricio Kagel, the Argentine-German composer who had a lifelong involvement with Music as Theatre:

“Theatre starts on the moment an individual is conscious of the intensity of his experience in time, and when he is aware that he can express that intensity; exactly at that moment a private experience is translated in scenic communication. The opposite of theatre is non-communication.”

So according to Kagel even an live-performance of something as abstract as a Bach-fugue is a form of scenic communication. And while Isaac Stern is afraid that movements of the body will distract us from “The Music” Mauricio Kagel asks his musicians: “....also, gestikulieren Sie ein wenig”, could you please gesticulate a bit.⁴

In 1988 François Delalande analysed some video-recordings of Glenn Gould, and he discerned three categories of gestures in his playing:

1.

Geste effectuer:

(purposeful gesture)

gestures to realise immediate tone-production

³ A.C. Lehmann, J.A. Sloboda, R.H. Woody, *Psychology for Musicians*, Oxford Un. Press, 2007, page 166

⁴ Sjoerd Ydema, *...also, gestikulieren sie ein wenig, Körpereinsatz zwischen Kritik und Experiment im Musiktheater von Mauricio Kagel*, doctoral thesis, Faculteit der Letteren Utrecht, 2006

2.

Geste accompagnateur:
(accompanying gesture)

gestures that accompany the tone-production, but not with a direct purpose for tone production

3.

Geste figuré:
(symbolic gesture)

gestures that are not directly related to the tone-production but seem to symbolize the music and/or the state of mind of the musician.

Could we still interpret the second category as a kind of gymnastic movements without much meaning, the third category clearly seems to have a theatrical purpose. But in fact the border between the two is probably blurred as soon as we accept the fact that bodily movements are directly related to what goes on in the mind!

We can easily imagine how a music performance has something to do with theatre if we are willing to understand theatre in a broad sense.

My next step will ask you to make a stronger imaginative effort when I say that there is always also theatre in the “music itself”. So even if we listen to an abstract piece of music on a CD we can experience the music by projecting theatrical experiences onto the music and even more so if the composer himself has a theatrical imagination, like, for example, Beethoven, Liszt or Jacob ter Veldhuis.

To make this point clear I have to make a short excursion into philosophy.

Modern researchers in cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics question the separation of Body and Mind. They state that concepts are not as abstract as we are inclined to believe and are directly linked to our bodily functioning, i.e. our “being embodied”. I quote from *Philosophy in the Flesh: the embodied mind and its challenge to western thought* by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson: “*Perception* has always been accepted as bodily in nature, just as movement is, *conception* as purely mental – the formation and use of concepts, but this picture is false: The body is not merely somehow involved in conceptualization but is shaping its very nature.”⁵

In this current view on knowledge and acquisition of knowledge Body and Mind are closely intertwined. In the words of Lakoff and Johnson: “Meaning has to do with the way in which we function meaningfully in the world and make sense of it via bodily and imaginative structures. This stands in contrast with the view that meaning is only an abstract relation among symbols or between symbols and states of affair in the world.”

Lakoff and Johnson propose that all our *experiential worlds* are interconnected and that they influence each other. That is what is meant by the assertion that there are continual inferences between our *experiential worlds*. This so-called process of “mapping” from one *experiential world* to another is defined by Lakoff and Johnson by the term cognitive metaphor. In Lakoff’s and Johnson’s theory “metaphor” is the human capacity to construe

⁵⁵ G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: the embodied mind and its challenge to western thought*, Basic Books, New York, 1999, pages 9 -15

relations between all domains of human thought and action: “We systematically use inference patterns from one domain to another domain and these ‘mappings’ are not purely abstract but they are shaped by our bodily experiences in the world.”
But “mapping” is only possible because different *experiential worlds* possess a common frame of reference that is ultimately reduceable to bodily experiences.

This supplies us with a model that seeks to transcend the boundary between mind and body.

And now we can understand what Mauricio Kagel means if he says: “The listener sees with his ears”.

We can see in the music of Kagel the two approaches of our theme of today: music as Theatre:

first:

“In “Instrumentalen Theater” Kagel is making theatre of the instrumental playing itself, by setting into scene the gestures of the musicians during playing. The traditional roles of musician and actor are combined.⁶

(pg 1. of the thesis)

and secondly:

“It is not only an analysis of the Musician/Body when playing, but also how the Body is present in the conception of the music itself”. (German: Kostituens der Musik im Kompositionsprozess)

(pg 7. of the thesis)⁷

Because we experience our body, space, movement etc. in our Mind, in our Imagination the Body is already present as soon as the composer, as soon as we start to think of music!

So we can analyse today how performers combine the role of musician and actor, we can look at great performers today, but we can also analyse how the theatre is in the music “itself”

A few examples of ‘Music and Theatre’ and of ‘Music ás Theatre’.

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Jurrien Sligter, version Feb. 2014 of a lecture for a Symposium on Music and Theatre

⁶ Sjoerd Ydema, ibidem, pg.1

⁷ Sjoerd Ydema, ibidem, pg. 7