



Doctoral School of Performing Arts

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Thesis Summary

Theatricality in the Stage Directing of the Great Opera Festivals: Models of Creativity

PhD Candidate

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The thesis entitled *Theatricality in the Stage Directing of the Great Opera Festivals: Models of Creativity* contains the analysis of the most important opera festivals, three artistic cores which both focus and stimulate, as an upward process, the theatricalisation phenomenon, discussed and debated during the 20th and 21st centuries. Through examination, investigation, the most important performances offered by these stages have highlighted turning points and avant-gardes, stirred up and created links between tradition and reform, from dependency to music to the transformation of the musical score into a theatrical product. This phenomenon was generated by the implication of the stage director who promotes, determine and defines the physiognomy of the new opera performance.

Bayreuth Festival started in 1876, is approached in the first chapter of the present research. It has as objective the *mise-en-scene* of Richard Wagner's operas, a model which generates a performance built on the basis of an unique vision, configured by the composer-stage director. Involving the leitmotif idea, stimulated by the german romanticism, total work of art, the stage directing has a new objective focused on displaying the monumental qualities and the prestige of Wagner's musical stage which becomes the essential starting point for theatrical reforms, a basis for the creative effervescence that arises in the 50ties.

The irreversible proces of theatricalisation is subsequently taken over by Salzburg Festival. The vision and the analysis of the performances in the austrian festival – developped in parallel with theatre – indicate different answers, on one hand motivated by the intangible requirements of the musical score, and on the other hand as solutions of adaptations of the traditional genre to actuality, in order to reanimate an exhausted mentality which concerned opera performance. The term "theatricality" in Salzburg reaches its peak through the program imposed by the manager Gérard Mortier in the 90ties, who offers unlimited apertures for new and daring versions. The third case study concerns the opera in the Bregenz Festival, which represents a particular model, asserted as an artistic perimeter dedicated to visual expansiveness, stimulated by scenography, by the the both plastic qualities of image and especially by vertical space architecture. Opera is expressed through theatrical means, as mixtures between imagine and music, continuously readapting and guiding the elitist contemporary audience's both theatrical aspirations and demands. The most obvious aspect of this proces, which concerns the opera's adjustment to modern theatrical requirements, is oriented towards the advantage demonstrated by the increasing interest for the condensation of its expressive power and grandeur and on the other hand for the cleavage between the new performance and the musical restrictions, which were initially an indispensable condition for the musical stage. The director's interference provokes the stylistic resistance of opera

performance in a context defined by fastness and novelty obtained by all means, which will subsequently culminate in visual excesses.

Nevertheless, the genre is always conjugated with elitism, but it is also frequently accompanied by compromising solutions. At the New Bayreuth, Wieland Wagner - through theatricalisation – finds a convenient solution for the festival's ideological reorientation, by imposing the model of symbolic reinterpretation of the musical text through form, volume and perspective. He transforms opera into a flexible texture, understandable for the new values which belong to the present times. The method of "scenic writing", subsequently proposed by the "author of performance" maneuvers the stage towards unpredictable directions, demonstrating the temporary efficiency by fixing well-defined physiognomies inspired by the theatrical reforms.

Originally, Bayreuth Festival is the symbol of nonconventional scenic art, continuously opened to new poetics of visual artists. The arguments which concern the risks caused by the above mentioned turnings of direction are underlined by musicologists who invoke the side-effects caused by the alination of the genuine objective of musical composition, established by a specific aesthetics and style, which aims towards the perfect balance of the components. The conflict between mise-en-scene and the intangible musical discourse generate caustic comments and disputes on this topic, which are not without qualified reasons brought into discussion by the supporters of the score's stylistic corecteness and its relation to musical score. Therefore, the analysis of the mise-en-scene in the content of the present research is based on the raport between music and performance, condition which defines the director's strategies and objectives, who maneuvers the scenic instruments stimulated by the theatrical reforms. Assessing the performances on the stages of the analysed festivals – Bayreuth, Salzburg, Bregenz – it is obvious that many of them become emblematic for each decade and aesthetics, continuously alining themselves to the tendencies of the contemporary visual arts, which for the most part, have exeeded the artistic aims of the traditional opera.

Starting from the assumption that opera – a well outlined genre in a tradition which determines its resistance – can bear pertinent theatrical adaptations and actual re-interpretations of the musical material, leads towards scenic creations which constrasts with the initial idea, grandiose representations, fundamentally musical. The focus of the present study – which become the argumentation's core – appears as a continuous extension of the traditional artistic sincretism circulated by *Camerata fiorentina*, the intellectual centre which formed the basis for the birth of opera, subsequently enlarged as "fusion" consolidated by the model offered by the wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk, which will inspire later the pattern

described by Adolphe Appia in *La musique et la mise en scene*. The theatricality of opera is later increased, through the reforms of Bertolt Brecht, post-brechtian and post-dramatic artistic phenomena valued by the performances from Bayreuth, Salzburg and Bregenz.

Ordering this process proposed by the present study is also based on the managerial thinking priorities which also clarifies both the progress and gaps of one stage compared with the other. The confirmed moment of theatricality is undoubtedly established by Bayreuth Festival in the 50ties, through Wieland Wagner, by Salzburg Festival in the 90ties through Gerard Mortier, and for Bregenz in 1985 due to the presence of Jerome Savary. Having as support the wagnerian concept of “total work of art”, Gesamtkunstwerk, there are dispersed the patterns which occur at the same time with the stage direction development and with its evolving relation with music: Werktreue and Regieoper. The new concepts systematize the two main directions of mise-en-scene, for and against music, clarifying the transition from tradition to crucial stages of reform, marking the turning points and branching of Gesamtkunstwerk through the contribution of Wieland Wagner, Walter Felsenstein and the consequences – from the direction of theatre – of Bertolt Brecht’s theories.

Thus, the 50ties allow the delimitation of the main stage of major reform through the inclination of stage directing towards the Wieland Wagner’s symbolist resources and the openings favoured by the reforms unfolded in the german theatrical area during the 60ties. They progress, in the 70ties, towards the aggressive Regietheater, subsequently transformed in Regieoper. The necessary hierarchical structure of the both stage direction’s process and heterogenous and interdisciplinary physiognomy of opera performance, influenced by theatre, its dependancy on theatrical reform, which is the guiding line of the present research. The relationship between stage directing and visual arts are also the basis of argumentation which explains the theatricality of opera performance. These procedures become the new logic of the median part of the 20th century, starting with Wieland Wagner and its symbolism, fixing the unmistakable image of Bayreuth (the concentric cercle, the geometric decoupage created through light-design, the metaphysical meanings). Another theoretical model is Walter Felsenstein who creates the link between the stanislawskian thinking regarding the dramatic text and the objectives of the musical dramaturgy). Not in the least it is essential to mention Bertolt Brecht, whose rules – inspired initially by the performance architecture and the ironic detachment of german cabaret of the 20ties – has important consequences for the opera theatricality, which is later demonstrated by Patrice Chereau at Bayreuth. The wagnerian festival becomes the first great beneficiary of the new theatricality based on these reforms.

The structure of the thesis consists in three chapters which start with Bayreuth, the first opera festival and the platform for opera stage directing, continuing with Salzburg Festival and Bregenz.

The first chapter *Romantic Values, Visual Reconfigurations, Deconstructive Stage-Directing (Bayreuth Festival)* has as starting point the polyvalent wagnerian theoretical system whose value is confirmed in favour of musical composition but also a stimulus for the development of theatricality. Gesamtkunstwerk is the fundamental term which link the beginning of theatrical thinking of opera on the german stage with the entire evolution of the genre, the connexion and interdependancy between stage directing and musical score. The involvement of the decorative element through realist solutions – which involves the alignment with the stylistic rigors and emotional and discursive tensions of romantic music – comprises an important stage of the wagnerian festival, starting with 1876, evolving for the next six decades until the 50ties. The transformation is revindicated by a performance motivated by a theatricality built on the wagnerian concept basis which regards the artistic fusion, dedicated firstly to denazification, and then to the creativity opened by stage directing.

New artists appear in foreground, with a mentality built in theatrical collectives, as extensions to the above mentioned maestros (Wagner, Felsenstein, Brecht), with amplifying interests concerning opera performance, inspired by the german theatre of the '70ties, whose intentions and artistic strategies function as link between the "theatre theatricality" and the one particular to opera. The second chapter's structure, *Opera Performane, From the Supremacy of Musical Score to Contemporary Stage Direction* (Salzburg Festival) also proposes a systematic pattern in order to conjugate the scenografic with the direction tendencies. Salzburg Festival has also as a centre the opera performance, linked with the composer Richard Strauss, the performance ensuring his philosophy and poetics as the basis of the selected repertory which rely on the link between the beginning of the festival with the present. With regard to the theatricality of this stage, the theatre performance of the festival is outlined by the mise-en-scene associated with Max Reinhardt, opera evolving alongside, excelling nevertheless through musical virtuosity and the precision of technical rendition, a performance conceived in the favour of music. The concomitant existence of these two aspects becomes the characteristic feature for the operistic genre sustained later by the longevous conductor Herbert von Karayan. His mentality was detached from the reforms of Bayreuth where the symbolism and the deconstructing stage are directing guides the opera, where the experimental approaches have irreversible consequences. The aggressive theatricalization propelled by Bayreuth will gain priority up to the end of the 80ties, contaminating the austrian stage with avangardist influences, a moment confirmed by the year 1991 and the arrival of Gerard Mortier, the new manager of Salzburg Festival. Initially

formed as stage director, Mortier changes the priorities of opera performance, orienting them towards the nonconformist directions of deconstructive mise-en-scene, involving North-American artist such as Peter Sellars and Robert Wilson. Following the theatrical twist of opera and through the new options proposed by Salzburg management, the alignment to the theatrical experimentalism is evolving, a phenomenon consolidated later by the program imposed by the ensuing managers after Mortier: Peter Ruzicka, Jürgen Flimm, Alexandre Pereira, Markus Hinterhauser. The experimental breakthrough of the new mise-en-scene is extended towards a larger musical repertory from different styles, having as basis the necessary actualization of references, which concerns mainly the pre-classic and classic opera.

The theatrical influences are obvious in the recent decades, shaping an erratic operistic landscape, situation which imposes a clear structure, either by resorting to the model of conceptual scenography, by turning to abstract scenic writing through the solutions offered by scenic space, or appealing to the artaudian theatre of cruelty and performance art. Opera theatricality continuously absorbs contemporary values, becomes dependant on multicultural references justified by globalization, immigration, emotional, spiritual and individual alienation caused by consumerism and daily routine. A common feature of Salzburg opera performance is defined by oscillations between the symbolic logic of the visual component and maintaining the old realist visions. But the main tendency is stimulated by deconstructivism, by the priority of the performance dramaturgy, increasingly oriented towards impressive consistencies, targeting a catharsis compatible with the preferences of the 21st Century audience. It still remains the issue of stylistic relationship, the necessary osmosis between music and mise-en-scene, principles which conditioned the longevity of this scenic genre, maintained in an era defined by stage direction, by the “scenic re-writting” and the interpretations proposed by the “author of performance”.

At Bregenz, the opera performance also demonstrates its theatrical value, which appears as an interesting consequence of reforms, concentrated and purified by the stage of Bayreuth and Salzburg. But its image is standing out as a mediator between the key concepts of the present study, *Werktreue* and *Regieoper*, inspired by the interest for scenographic creativity. Following the model of analysis from the previous chapters, the expansion of theatricality is caused by the transition from operetta, which ensure the interest for the austrian stage (*Seebühne*) until the 70ties, when the emerging scenographic tendencies and the visual priorities of stage directing are conditioned by the space vertical amplitude. For Bregenz the theatricality is similar with the visual art implication, simultaneously carried out with the amplification of theatrical coordinates of opera. Geographically closed to Bayreuth and Salzburg, to the influence caused firstly by the new waves from the direction of the wagnerian stage and secondly by the ambition of Salzburg (until the 90ties) to maintain the

musical superiority in opera performance, for Bregenz there are also obvious two directions which intensify a prudent mentality regarding the mise-en-scene. This attitude demonstrate diplomacy against changes, but also stimulated by the experiments performed by the new generation of artists. Consequently, the expansive Bregenz scenography, the monumental scenic architecture and engineering solutions offer functionality for the vertical space. The image is invested with multiple roles, from objects to characters, from seismographic configurations to industrial metaphors. These changes are due to the interventions of the british stage designers who offer a more conciliatory solution with the musical score, defining essential differences against the stages from Salzburg and Bayreuth from the last decades.

The conclusions of the thesis emphasize the aspects concerning the interests but especially the risks caused by the aggressive theatricality of opera. Evidently, the main emphasis of musical performance cannot disregard the musical score defined by the ethos, values, aesthetics of its specific time.