PART FOUR

Directions

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14 Music theatre since the 1960s

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Avant-garde music and theatre

Of all the performing arts, none has been more circumspect about its theatrical nature than classical concert music. A romantic ideology that located musical content in sounds rather than actions or locations, and that accordingly identified composer rather than performer as the primary origin of that content, came to ensure that the act of performance was, as far as possible, rendered invisible. The theatre of musical performance was largely limited to a carefully circumscribed ritual of dress and behaviour; the performer who sought to assert his or her individuality over and above this ritual risked accusations of charlatanism.

On the face of it, the postwar avant-garde in Europe and America, while enthusiastically dispensing with other aspects of musical tradition, represented the apotheosis of this downplaying of the business of performance. Here was a music that elevated the abstract sonic configuration to the status of a fetish, that finally eradicated the pleasure of the performer as a compositional consideration, and that seemed more at home in the lecture room or the computer lab than the concert hall. As Paul Griffiths has noted, 'in the 1950s ... few young composers wanted to work in the theatre. Indeed, to express that want was almost enough ... to separate oneself from the avant-garde' (1995, 171). And yet this apparently arid terrain for theatrical endeavour was soon touched by developments that, conversely, prepared the ground for quite new sorts of musical theatre. During the second half of the 1950s, the music of the avant-garde became, albeit frequently unwittingly, suffused with the spirit of theatre.

This occurred in a number of ways. First, the virtuosity demanded of performers by avant-garde scores in itself served to highlight the very act of performance. A new generation of performers – including figures such as David Tudor, Cathy Berberian and Severino Gazzelloni – became renowned specifically for championing modern music, and grateful composers, including Berio and Cage, responded by devising solo works that celebrated performance virtuosity as much as compositional technique. These and other works frequently experimented with extended instrumental and vocal techniques; the theatrical element of all musical performance was thus enhanced as a performer set about his or her instrument in

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ways that intruded upon and transgressed the 'neutral' codes of the concert ritual.

A second important development in 1950s avant-garde music also assumed an active rather than passive interpreter: namely, indeterminacy. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, declares that dramatic character is a product of the choices made by an individual (Dorsch 1965, 41): by this reckoning, the ceding to performers of an element of compositional decision-making brings a particularly theatrical quality to musical performance. Indeterminacy or aleatoricism appears in the music of composers of all hues at this time – be it the carefully delimited alternative routes prescribed in Boulez's Piano Sonata No. 3 (1957), or the more generous freedoms of Cage's music – initiated by the notorious 'silent' piece *4′33″* (1952), which 'may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time'. Intriguingly, though, this elevation of the performative act also seemed logical to composers who, conversely, preferred to retain more total authorial control. For Stockhausen, the movement of performers' bodies was deemed a legitimate concern for the composer precisely because of the desire for optimum integration. According to Stockhausen's spokesperson Karl Wörner,

> The basic tendency is to integrate into the composition every phenomenal aspect of music, everything that can be observed by the senses. In this way one necessarily comes to the idea of 'musical theatre'. (1973, 187)

The same rationale lies behind Stockhausen's fondness for unconventional stage layouts; and this utilization of space as a musical parameter constitutes a third characteristic of avant-garde music that predisposes it towards theatre. Occasional precedents had been set in the music of Ives and Harry Brant, but it was Stockhausen who was largely responsible for establishing it as accepted practice in contemporary music. *Gruppen* (1957) and *Trans* (1971) are both essentially orchestral pieces, but in deriving much of their musical motivation from the unorthodox spatial disposition of the musicians they knock at the door of music theatre. Spatial layout was to become central to the music of a number of other composers: it reinforces the explicit instrumental theatre in Birtwistle for instance; and it can also contribute to the sense that the vocal music of György Kurtág, though not actually labelled as music theatre, nevertheless comprises what Adrienne Csengery has termed 'camouflaged opera' (quoted in Griffiths 1995, 283).

A final germane development in 1950s avant-garde music from the viewpoint of theatre is the advent of electronic composition. Stockhausen was particularly influential here too. His landmark contribution to the

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genre, the *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1956), reinforced the theatre implicit in the speech and song that are the piece's primary sound source with a spatial dimension: the music is bounced between four speakers placed around the auditorium. The electronic alteration of speech later formed the basis of works written especially for radio broadcast by Berio (*Thema – omaggio a Joyce* (1958) and *Visage* (1961)), works which, in the words of David Osmond-Smith, 'explore the borderline where sound as the bearer of linguistic sense dissolves into sound as the bearer of musical meaning' (1991, 62). The imaginary theatre conjured up in such works is not wholly dependent upon an origin in spoken or other 'found' sounds, however. The attraction of wholly synthesized tape pieces often lies precisely in their tendency to connote real-world objects, actions and scenarios. It is difficult to hear the original version of Stockhausen's *Kontakte* (1960), for instance, without imagining a journey through a futuristic landscape. In more recent electronic music – such as Gilles Gobeil's remarkable *Le vertige inconnu* (1993) – synthesized sounds can conjure up a 'virtual' world of machinery and motions with such immediacy that they almost relinquish their claim to be 'music' at all.

Music theatre: definitions

As composers awoke to the dramatic potential of their evolving compositional concerns, so the theatrical aspect of their work became more pronounced. Indeed, this theatrical orientation permeated music of the 1960s and early 1970s sufficiently thoroughly to make the distinguishing of a separate genre of 'music theatre' rather problematic. An indication of this difficulty is given by Griffiths' suggestion that the genre's death-knell was sounding in 1972 (1994, 334), despite the fact that the majority of Stockhausen's and Henze's 'music theatre' pieces (for example) had yet to be written.

It cannot be assumed, for instance, that the presence of a human voice is a prerequisite for music theatre. Many of the standard exemplars of the genre, at least as defined in dictionary accounts, have no vocal component: see, for example, Kagel's *Match* (1964) and Peter Maxwell Davies's *Vesalii icones* (1969). The question then arises as to whether *any* work that contains an element of purely instrumental theatre must count as music theatre. There are distinctions to be drawn even within this sub-genre. The sorts of enaction involved in Kagel's and Birtwistle's instrumental music, for instance, differ markedly. Kagel's works, in accommodating facial expressions and bodily gestures over and above those required for instrumental performance, invite closer comparisons with the spoken

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theatre; Birtwistle's rôle-play is largely limited to stage placement and sharply characterized musical material. These works, in possessing characteristics shared with many *vocal* theatre works, are clearly candidates for discussion in the present context. Other variants on the theme of instrumental theatre – in the music of composers as disparate as Berio, Tan Dun and Rebecca Saunders – will not be discussed here; but this is more a reflection of their limited relevance in a book about opera than an indication of some fundamental discontinuity with the tradition of postwar music theatre.

The line between music theatre and instrumental composition is thus not easily drawn. The same is true for music theatre and chamber opera. Music theatre has often been distinguished from opera simply on the basis of its reduced scale and the altered performance venues and conventions that this entails. Music theatre, it might be argued, concerns the introduction of practices of the theatre into the sphere of chamber music; alternatively – to entertain an even more general definition – it comprises 'theatre' pieces intended for performance in a concert hall. Such definitions nicely accommodate those music-theatre pieces that involve dance or mime rather than staged song, while not discriminating against the latter. There was often a financial explanation behind this turn to the small scale and the less elaborate (Clements 1992, 529). Opera houses were well aware that their audience had become firmly attached to a repertoire of endlessly repeated classics, and that the presentation of costly new works usually meant box-office disaster; composers therefore had to resort to other, cheaper means. However, these financial constraints were felt by avant-garde and 'conservative' composers alike: a sizing-down in scale should not be taken as indication of a fundamental antipathy to opera. Britten's chamber operas, most notably, capitalized on the intimacy that smaller forces allowed; more recent years have seen a healthy flow of small-scale theatre works (from figures such as Thomas Adès, Martin Butler, Mark-Anthony Turnage and Judith Weir in Britain alone) that are at least as much 'opera' as 'music theatre'. Conversely, imposing works have been produced in the opera house that are more 'music theatre' than 'opera': Berio's *Passaggio* (1962) and Birtwistle's *The Mask of Orpheus* (1983) fall into this category. Scale is a far from wholly reliable indicator of genre.

One of the primary reasons why both *Passaggio* and *The Mask of Orpheus* strain at the boundaries of their putative genre is their manner of story-telling. Both works adopt an overtly non-naturalistic and (in certain respects) anti-narrative approach. At earlier stages of its history, opera had been the most affectedly artificial of theatrical genres; but developments in the second half of the nineteenth century came to ensure

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that, from the perspective of the middle of the twentieth century, opera was seen as a vehicle for the essentially realistic portrayal of dramatic situations and psychological states. Music theatre, by contrast, is often characterized as being pre-eminently anti-realist – and, thereby, as representing (paradoxically) something of a throwback to early opera.

In some ways this propensity for anti-realism is a better criterion for distinguishing between music theatre and other genres than the others explored here. It is a propensity that can take two forms. First, narrative cogency may be deliberately exploded – whether by presenting a succession of situations that refuse reduction to a simple narrative sequence, or by combining material that is not clearly related so that the drama appears internally divergent or contradictory. Such challenges to narrative cogency may be found in abundance in the music-theatre works of Salvatore Sciarrino, where pre-existing stories may be reassembled in the 'wrong' order, as in *Lohengrin* (1982), or all pretence of narrative focus is abandoned in favour of a 'surrealist montage' of ideas and text-sources, as in *Cailles en sarcophage* (1979) and *Vanitas* (1981) (Osmond-Smith 1992, 268). Sciarrino's focus on the disturbed psychological states of his 'characters' means that his theatrical works sometimes resemble staged songs as much as they do traditional narrative opera; this is true of *Lohengrin* and the more recent *Infinito nero* (1997), for instance.

Second, taking a cue from Bertolt Brecht, composers have set about the disintegration of the stage illusion that forms such a central part of traditional theatre. Brecht's proposition that theatre should provoke critical thought on the part of the spectator, and that to do this it needed to resist 'seducing [him] into an enervating ... act of enjoyment' by stressing the artificiality of the enaction (Willett 1964, 89), finds a resonance in music theatre's fondness for placing singers and instrumentalists on the same platform, and for withdrawing naturalistic scenery. Birtwistle's *Bow Down* (1977), with its tight circle of actor-singers defining the performance space in the centre of the stage, is emblematic of this pared-down, functional approach. Indeed the disassemblage of 'the pretence of opera' has been viewed as intrinsic to the 'whole nature of music theatre' (Griffiths 1994, 326).

Even here there are occasional exceptions. Hans Werner Henze's *La Cubana* (1974) is described by the composer as 'a "vaudeville" ... in which all the music is employed realistically. Music can be heard and seen in it only where it would also be heard and seen in real life', a conceit made possible by the fact that the piece is about a chanteuse and the bar in which she sings (Henze 1982, 207). Here music theatre seeks to oppose operatic illusion, not through stylization, but rather with an almost clinical realism. Henze's piece serves to make the point that music theatre

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is perhaps ultimately best seen as an 'anti-genre' – which is to say, as characterized by a refusal to conform to traditional or pre-existing genres and categories, rather than by any other consistent traits. Music theatre tends to illuminate the awkward interstices between art forms, the gaps between existing aesthetic categories. This tendency is most obviously apparent in the compositions of the American performing artists who, during the early 1960s, came to be known collectively as 'Fluxus'. The text pieces of George Brecht, for instance, which instruct the performer to undertake some sort of action, have been described not as multimedia but as 'intermedia', in that 'they inhabit the area *between* poetry and performance' (Nyman 1999, 79; emphasis added). Along similar lines, LaMonte Young justified his *Composition 1960 No. 2*, in which a fire is built in front of the audience, on the basis that it is good for someone to 'listen to what he ordinarily just looks at, or look at things he would ordinarily just hear' (84). The active involvement of European composers, notably Nono and Berio, with experimental theatre companies in the mid-1960s, suggests the degree to which they, too, were willing to loosen the boundaries of their activities.

This 'anti-conventional urge in music theatre' has been viewed as containing the seeds of an eventual demise: a settling into generic patterns and clichés was never an option (Griffiths 1994, 334). Yet, as we have already seen, claims of the death of music theatre may have been premature. Younger generations of postwar composers have undertaken theatrical ventures that are often strikingly consistent with the 'classic' works of the 1960s and 1970s. This consistency is easier to perceive if we look, not for similarities of style or technique, but instead for some wider preoccupations that appear to unite much of what has been called 'music theatre'. The remainder of this discussion will address a number of these preoccupations. First, it will look at the relation of music theatre to politics – and particularly the cultural politics of 'classical' and avant-garde music performance. Second, it will examine the ways in which the musical and performance styles of much music theatre have revelled in allusions to and affinities with the practices of different cultural traditions. And third, it will draw attention to music theatre's interest in focusing our minds on certain existential universals: specifically, time; the human body; and space.

Music theatre and politics

For more than a few avant-garde composers in the 1960s and 1970s, music theatre's refutation of traditional genres, especially opera, had an

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explicitly political edge. Music theatre was the beneficiary of two related developments in the avant-garde at the start of the 1960s. The first was the awakening of a belief that avant-garde musical idioms found their validity and legitimacy not in appeals to abstract notions of structural cogency, but rather in their political function. The growing dissemination of Theodor Adorno's writings helped propagate the idea that the rejection of historical musical languages and forms, tainted as they were seen to be, was politically progressive. At the same time, many avant-garde composers were feeling a profound (if less explicitly voiced) hunger to engage once again with the realm of human affairs, after a decade of obsession with the abstract shaping of the molecules of musical material.

Music theatre thus provided an answer to two important developments in avant-garde music, by allowing a re-engagement with dramatic enaction in a form that explicitly refuted bourgeois theatrical conventions. This was the ideal medium for the overtly political messages of early music-theatre works such as Nono's *Intolleranza 1960* (1961) and Berio's *Passaggio* (1962), both of which commented gravely on political oppression. Elsewhere in Europe, the 'political' element of music theatre took a more introspective form, focusing first and foremost upon classical-music institutions and conventions rather than the world outside the opera house or concert hall. Part of this critique was implicit in the modest scale of many music-theatre works, which could be construed as a riposte against the expense and extravagance of bourgeois opera. But commentary on the rituals of classical performance could also take the form of an increased elaborateness. This is the case in Stockhausen's first full-blown excursion into music theatre, *Originale* (1961), which incorporates excerpts from the revised version of *Kontakte* (including live performers) and surrounds them with 'a polyphony of actions, involving music, drama, film, photography, painting, recording, street theatre and street music' (Maconie 1990, 115). Stockhausen's juxtaposition of the *Kontakte* extracts against the everyday activities of a recording engineer, a painter and a host of other miscellaneous characters, naturally served to highlight the artificiality of the conventions of classical musical performance: it is as if the presentation of the earlier piece was placed in inverted commas. The experience may have unnerved Stockhausen, for it exposed the historical contingencies – in the form of assumptions about concert presentation – upon which his supposedly forward-looking compositional output largely depended. For the rest of the 1960s he largely limited his theatricalisms to matters of stage placing and sound diffusion, devices that represented less of a challenge to the ritual of concert performance.

No composer has undertaken a more concerted examination of the business of musical performance than Mauricio Kagel: indeed, classical-music

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practice constitutes the principal subject of his music theatre. Kagel has been described as setting out to 'demystify the ritual' of the classical concert (Perrin 1981, 11), and this he does especially by highlighting the absurdities of virtuoso performance. On the face of it, then, here is a good example of an avant-garde attack on a cornerstone of the nineteenth-century performance tradition – one that appeared to be underlined in *Staatstheater* (1970), Kagel's exhaustive analysis of the absurdities of grand opera. In actuality, though, the real critical edge of Kagel's theatre arises from the way that his critique of the nineteenth-century virtuoso blurs into a ruthless nose-thumbing at the performative challenges of contemporary music. This tendency was already apparent in the early *Transición II* (1959) for pianist, percussionist and tapes. Ostensibly the piece is an attempt to fuse musical past, present and future through the use of tape recordings. But its conjunction of taped extracts from earlier in the performance with the continuing frantic actions required of the percussionist in real time – with the result that 'there are too many sounds to be accounted for by the actions one sees' (Toop 1974, 37) – seems more intended as sarcastic comment on the excessive difficulty of much avant-garde music. Griffiths appropriately describes the work as 'a caricature of contemporary avant-garde endeavour' (1995, 139).

Later works by Kagel play more openly on this theme. In *Sur scène* (1960), a speaker accompanies the bizarre musical gestures of a baritone and three instrumentalists with an absurd parody of a learned treatise on contemporary music (see Attinello 2002 and Heile 2002). *Match* 'for three players' (two cellos and percussion) emphasizes in its very title the proximity of virtuoso musical performance to spectator sport. That both this piece and the later *Siegfried P* (1972) are intended specifically as salvos against avant-garde music, where virtuosity tends to be lost on all but the most schooled of listeners (as opposed to the nineteenth-century virtuoso tradition, where technical achievement is likely to be more widely appreciated) is strongly suggested by the discrepancy between the performers' heroic actions and the relative banality of the sounds that result (Toop 1974, 37).

Satirical comment on the eccentric behaviours required of performers by avant-garde composers may not be completely absent from Ligeti's *Aventures* (1962–6) and *Nouvelles aventures* (1965–6) either, and this time it is vocalists rather than instrumentalists who are subject to examination. Although originally intended as concert pieces, Ligeti later allowed these two works to be staged, an apt move in view of the overt theatricality of the three soloists' bizarre, wordless vocalization. The rapid mood-changes and extended techniques of the nonsensical vocal parts can certainly be read as a critique of the clichés of much contemporary

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opera of the time (Griffiths 1994, 330). They also have their own strangely compelling poetry, however, an impression strengthened by the refined and focused music of the accompanying chamber ensemble.

As noted earlier in this chapter, musical theatre is in many ways intrinsically at odds with the aesthetics of the avant-garde. The referentiality of staged enactions compromises the autonomy that avant-garde composers like to claim for their music; as Eric Salzman has suggested, music theatre 'reverses the purism of modern art' (1988, 245). It is notable that the most ardent champions of modernism have remained resistant to theatrical ventures – at least until very recent times. The absence of theatre works in the output of Pierre Boulez is consistent with his notorious diatribe (in 1967) against the institution of the opera house; and although an operatic project was mooted in the 1990s (see the composer's interview in Ford 1993, 22) his suspicion of the theatrical projects of his contemporaries is indicated by his reported dismissal of music theatre as 'opera of the poor' (Clements 1992, 529). Like Boulez, Milton Babbitt has written extensively for the voice, but his only theatrical work is a now unknown musical, *Fabulous Voyage* (1946), whose style uncharacteristically reflects Babbitt's life-long enthusiasms for jazz and Tin Pan Alley. Only in very late life has Elliott Carter penned a chamber opera, and its title, *What Next?* (1999), seems to allude to the erstwhile unlikelihood of such a development. Other prominent carriers of the modernist flame, such as Brian Ferneyhough and James Dillon, have likewise only recently ventured into music theatre (Ferneyhough's *Shadowtime* and Dillon's *Philomela* both received first performances in 2004).

It was in keeping with the prevailing modernist suspicion of theatrical endeavour during the 1970s that prominent composers of music theatre at that time should set themselves far more openly in opposition to the modernist avant-garde. Works from this period by composers such as Henze and Louis Andriessen owe more to the tradition of Weill and Brecht than to the hermetic constructions of the Darmstadt school – constructions that underpin even Kagel's and Ligeti's theatre works. In his writings, Henze is unambiguous that the theatrical impulse in his music is concerned to 'drive out abstraction and inhumanity', that his music 'sees itself as drama, as something that inwardly belongs to life, and could not exist in tidy abstinence or in the private domestic realm' (1982, 207 and 230). For Henze, bourgeois musical life and the institutionalized avant-garde are merely two sides of the same coin. This is made explicit in the 'show for seventeen performers', *The Tedious Way to Natascha Ungeheuer's Flat* (1971), which tells of a bourgeois leftist revolutionary who is tempted away from active participation in the social struggle by the

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siren-like artist Ungeheuer. In addition to a *musique concrète* tape and a brass quintet, the work features on stage the ensemble of Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, part-dressed in Pierrot costumes and part-dressed as doctors carrying various injuries. As Henze comments,

> The significance of the two types of costume points to one thing: sickness, the sickness of the bourgeoisie, its music, its morality, the suffering of a class that has made itself sick. What they have to say has its origins in Schoenberg's construct, but has departed from it and broken with it, beyond the point of parody towards a new kind of denunciatory analytical music-exercise. (1982, 191)

In *Natascha Ungeheuer*, then, the *Pierrot* ensemble acts as a cipher for the political quiescence of progressive intellectualism. The subtle critiques offered by Kagel and Ligeti are here replaced with an explicit protest against avant-garde art.

Andriessen's *Matthew Passion* (1976) and *Orpheus* (1977), conceived in collaboration with the experimental Dutch Baal Theatre Group, ostensibly take as their primary points of reference the revered 'classical music' tradition of Bach and Monteverdi–Gluck–Stravinsky. Both works' self-consciously raw and irreverent scenarios and theatrical style are certainly designed to jar with the refined sensibilities of the traditional concert-going audience: in the first, Jesus is depicted as a Jewish female prostitute (the brothel in which she works is managed by 'Magdalena'); in the second, Orpheus is a spoilt mother's boy who is deliberately betrayed by a vengeful Eurydice. But Andriessen's music, with its highly eclectic musical idiom and idiosyncratic scoring, also pitches itself against the modernist avant-garde. The score to *Matthew Passion* is, in the words of Willem Jan Otten and Elmer Schönberger, 'a musical minefield of irony, parody, paraphrase' scored for an ensemble that includes music students, a jazz horn player and a gypsy violinist (1978, 25). *Orpheus*, meanwhile, intimates that the hero is a pop singer, and the work includes a Shirley Bassey-like 'Lied van Orpheus', jazz-rock music accompanying the first appearance of Aristaeus, and a 'Grand ballet en mi-bemol majeur avec choeur with respectful greetings to Steve Reich, Phil Glass and the others' (32).

The waning of musical modernism's institutional power during the 1980s and 1990s was accompanied by a softening of both Henze's and Andriessen's musical and theatrical outlook. Works such as Henze's *Das verratene Meer* (1989) and Andriessen's *Rosa* (1994) were written for the opera house and place a higher premium on stylistic consistency and narrative continuity. In so far as the more innovative and colourful approaches to music theatre were driven by an essentially political desire

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to refute the drab monotony of much avant-garde music, they were never guaranteed to flourish in the postmodern age.

Mixing traditions

One of the ways in which music theatre became symbolic of a move away from the priorities of the avant-garde was its tendency to encourage an intermingling of different musical traditions. The comparatively small scale of many music-theatre works was important in this respect, for it allowed more direct comparisons with musical cultures from outside the classical tradition, and indeed from beyond the Western world. A connection with folk music was already clearly present in important early twentieth-century precursors to music theatre – notably Stravinsky's *Renard* (1916) and *L'Histoire du soldat* (1918). This precedent was enthusiastically taken up by Harrison Birtwistle, not just in his theatre works *Punch and Judy* (1967) and *Down by the Greenwood Side* (1969), which drew on historical popular entertainments for both their subject matter and, in the latter case, instrumentation, but also in his creation (with Maxwell Davies) of the Pierrot Players, a flexible and transportable ensemble that formed a kind of 1960s parallel to the *théâtre ambulant* of *L'Histoire du soldat*. In both Birtwistle's and Maxwell Davies's music theatre, considerable importance is given to mime and dance, theatrical forms that carry a certain primitivist or folk-like connotation. Maxwell Davies's *Vesalii icones* (1969) for male dancer, cello and instrumental ensemble and *Blind Man's Buff* (1972) for vocalists, mime and instrumental ensemble, are indicative of this predilection, which reached a massive culmination in Birtwistle's *The Mask of Orpheus* (1973–83), with its panoply of puppets, actors and dancers. Mime and dance remained important in the music-theatre works of younger British composers in the 1970s and 1980s, including Nicola LeFanu, Roger Marsh and Trevor Wishart.

In the case of Marsh, the desire to incorporate certain sorts of physical movement and stage disposition was as much the result of an interest in non-Western performance traditions as it was an urge to tap into primeval forms of expression. Marsh's interest in Japanese music and theatre, in particular, informed the extreme vocalizations and movements of *Dum* (1972–7) for solo vocalist-actor, and the unusual stage layout of *Kagura* (1991) for chamber ensemble. It also led him to create the Centre for Japanese Music at the University of York. Marsh's turn to the Far East is representative of a wider trend in music theatre; few composers remained completely immune to the fascination of Japanese, African or

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other non-Western traditions as they became more widely known during the 1960s. Exposure to such influences had both specific and general consequences for composers' own works. An obvious example of the former is Britten's *Curlew River* (1964), which draws its story and stage layout from a Japanese Nō play (see Cooke 1998, 130–59). The importance of masks, and of stylized movement and vocalization to many music-theatre works by younger composers reflects a more general influence. W. Anthony Sheppard has suggested that one of the principal attractions of such conceits (which, for many composers, derive also from an interest in ancient Greek theatre) is the way in which they deflect attention away from the performer, who is denied any real opportunity to express his or her individuality, and towards the composer, who emerges as an unchallengeable 'High Priest' figure (2001, 19–20). An interest in the practices of other cultures was thus by no means always motivated by a sense of creative modesty.

Music theatre's emphasis upon the theatricality of musical performance also brought contemporary classical music closer, in certain respects, to the ambit of contemporary pop. As Simon Frith has pointed out, pop performance involves 'a process of double enactment', in which singers 'enact both a star personality (their image) and a song personality, the role that each lyric requires ... the pop star's art is to keep both acts in play at once' (1996, 212). Much music theatre involves a similar double enactment. It can achieve this by foregrounding the theatricality of its own means – sometimes at the expense of projecting the drama of its subject. In Birtwistle's *The Mask of Orpheus* the elaborate staging and other theatrical paraphernalia required to realise it properly reflects the title's allusion to 'masque', the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century genre whose *raison d'être* was the celebration of spectacle and artifice (Adlington 2000, 16–17). Alternatively, music theatre may expose the theatre of conventional classical performance rituals – rituals to which we more usually turn a blind eye. Some examples of this sort of approach in the work of Kagel and Henze have already been discussed.

Whichever 'foreign' musical tradition is involved, the attraction of alluding to it is frequently the same: it facilitates a redrawing or disintegration of the boundaries that define classical music. These boundaries may concern the nature of the performing space, the particular duties assigned to performers, or the authorial control of the composer. For Henze, such redrawing has a demystificatory function: 'In music-theatre, as I envisage it, music is incorporated into the drama, is performed on the stage rather than invisibly in the pit, is a concert dissolved into movement and action: demystified music' (1982, 207). So, music theatre frequently reconfigures the classical performance space by placing instrumentalists

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and actors on the same stage. This arrangement suggests that the instrumental music can no longer be presumed to have a subordinate or supporting function (as is implied by the consignment of the orchestra to the pit), and it also enables a greater interaction between performers. In some instances the instrumentalists actually become *dramatis personae*, crucial to the action. This is the case in Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969), for instance, where the instrumentalists represent the caged birds owned by the dying King. In Henze's *La Cubana*, the on-stage instrumentalists form the chanteuse's accompanying band and are given strict instructions as to how to play their music 'in character'.

Alternatively, sharing a stage simply allows a type of interaction not possible when instrumentalists are placed in a pit. Maxwell Davies's *Vesalii icones* sets one of the instrumentalists (the cellist) apart from the rest of the ensemble; while the cellist does not literally participate in the danced 'action', the solo dancer interacts with him or her as a second character. Birtwistle's dance piece *Pulse Field* (1976) takes the idea a little further: the actions of the dancers are now partly governed by cues from the instrumentalists, who are positioned symmetrically around the edge of the stage.

Breaking down the barriers between instrumentalists and actors or singers is one important respect in which music theatre encourages a rethinking of standard performance arrangements; breaking down the barriers between performers and audience is another. Berio's *Passaggio* established a precedent in this regard by planting a speaking chorus amongst the audience, with the intention that their contributions should 'give brutally self-revealing voice to the inner thoughts of a cultured, bourgeois audience' (Osmond-Smith 1991, 92). The bringing together of performer and audience is particularly characteristic of the theatre of John Cage. For Cage, 'theatre takes place all the time wherever one is and art simply facilitates persuading one that this is the case' (cited in Nyman 1999, 80); as a result, audience and performers are not to be kept apart but should be allowed to interact. The theatre should be arranged, says Cage, 'so that the physical circumstances of a concert do not oppose audience to performers but dispose the latter around – among the former' (Schmitt 1982, 21). In particular, the frontality and single focus of the conventional theatre, in attempting to present everyone with the same experience, contradicts Cage's desire to emphasize the equal validity of different individual experiences. The format of the circus was exemplary in this respect, and the circus became an important guiding influence for Cage's own theatrical events. His *Musicircus* (1967), in which musicians were invited to perform independently but simultaneously in any way they desired, went beyond the in-the-round arrangement of the traditional

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circus and encouraged the audience to wander freely around the main floor of the pavilion (Pritchett 1993, 157–8). The same principle was applied both for further one-off performances – for example, a performance in November 1969 at the University of California at Davis entitled *Mewantemooseicday* – and more carefully structured 'works', such as *HPSCHD*, also dating from 1969 (Revill 1992, 225–32).

Thus music theatre may seek to undo the rigid arrangement of singers, instrumentalists and audience conventional in opera or classical concerts. It also serves to undermine the rigid specialization of performers. Instrumentalists are required to diversify; now, rather than simply playing a single instrument, they may have to play several, or sing, or act. Henze's *La Cubana*, with its 'in character' instrumental ensemble, has already been mentioned. Henze's other music theatre works demand a comparable flexibility on the part of his instrumentalists. *El Cimarrón* (1970), for instance, requires all four instrumentalists to play a number of instruments, and in *Natascha Ungeheuer* the solo on-stage percussionist is on occasion required to 'stand in' for the main vocal protagonist. Henze's desire to make his instrumentalists into actors finds a measure of correspondence in Birtwistle's *Bow Down* (1977), in which numerous versions of the fable of The Two Sisters are presented through song and dramatic enaction. In Birtwistle's piece, the actors are just as much musicians as the musicians are actors. The score admittedly describes each of the nine performers as either a 'musician' or an 'actor', but this indicates a relatively slight difference in emphasis: all the performers make music, often of a fairly rudimentary kind, and all the performers contribute to the acted drama. For Henze, this sort of departure from the narrow specializations that characterize classical music culture constitutes part of music theatre's liberating function:

> I would like the music to lay bare something of the history of the instrumentalists, which belongs to the history of the working people. I would like the instrumentalists to interpret themselves consciously, and to extend their scope, so that they see themselves as inhabiting a realm of increased possibilities – possibilities of self-realization and self-liberation, which are assuredly a prerequisite for liberation on a larger scale. (1982, 215)

Fundamentals: time, body, space

Cage's belief that 'theatre is all around us' (Nyman 1999, 72) shared something of the democratizing motivation just identified in Henze and Birtwistle. Cage gave creative licence not only to the professional performer but to the audience as well. Indeed, he did so to the extent that the

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very distinction between art and reality, and certainly art's privileged status in relation to reality, started to collapse (79–80). Cage viewed all his creations as theatre, and if in certain respects they exist at one remove from music theatre as it is commonly defined – in Griffiths 1994, for example, Cage receives only a single brief mention as an influence on Stockhausen (334) – they nevertheless serve as a reminder of the extent to which music theatre has been nourished by a concern to replace old and exhausted categories of action with underlying fundamentals.

Thus for Cage a hard and fast distinction between music and theatre was untenable. Other composers of the 1950s and early 1960s sought 'new unions' of music and theatre, but for Cage these were not separate realms in the first place. Cage's primary interest was, instead, with that which underlay, and was articulated by, actions of any sort: namely, time. The meticulous structuring of time had been a prominent feature of Cage's early works; now, in his own theatre works and those of his followers, the organization of time comes to supersede the organization of sound as the composer's primary business. In works such as *4'33"*, *Water Music* (1952) and *Theatre Piece* (1960), not to mention the 'happenings' that Cage first organized in the early 1950s, 'music' comes to mean simply 'activities in time'. In 1961 Robert Ashley stated that

> Cage's influence on contemporary music, on 'musicians' is such that the entire metaphor of music could change to such an extent that – time being uppermost as a definition of music – the ultimate result would be a music that wouldn't necessarily involve anything but the presence of people . . .
> (Cited in Nyman 1999, 11)

Thus LaMonte Young would, in his *Composition 1960 No. 10*, 'draw a straight line on the floor and follow it'. In the words of Michael Nyman, 'the line piece becomes an extended metaphor. For a line is a "potential of existing time" and is therefore relevant to music' (83).

Few of Cage's European contemporaries went so far in erasing the boundaries between art and life. Nevertheless a parallel concern with the articulation of fundamentals of existence may be detected in many music-theatre works. For instance, works by composers as different as Stockhausen, Birtwistle and Harry Partch can be seen to involve a focus upon the human body. In the case of Stockhausen this focus originated in a perception concerning instrumental music, namely that 'musicians move about while playing; thus this movement will be endowed with an independent meaning too' (Wörner 1973, 187). Stockhausen's determination to incorporate this physical aspect of music-making in his composition results in works that are less concerned with amalgamating old genres, and more predicated upon an exploration of the potential of the

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performing body. Thus in *Inori* (1974), a solo part written in musical notation 'is interpreted by two dancer-mimers, who translate the notes and inflections of the solo line into an "action melody" of silent gestures drawn from world religions' (Maconie 1990, 230). *Harlekin* (1975) attempts to forge a unity between the music and danced action performed by a solo clarinettist, both of which present 'a large-scale wave form' (252). And *Musik im Bauch* (1975) deploys six percussionists in an enaction that blends instrumental performance and ritual activity; the 'bodily' focus is dramatized by the centring of the actions upon a mannequin that houses musical boxes in its belly (the 'Bauch' of the title).

This last work makes for an interesting comparison with Harrison Birtwistle's *Bow Down*. In drawing attention to the difficulties in maintaining absolute distinctions between words and music, or dance and musical performance, *Bow Down* effectively posits instead a wider and more sustainable category that emphasizes the common basis of all acts of performance in the human body. And, as with *Musik im Bauch*, Birtwistle's work dramatizes the centrality of the performing body in its very scenario, which revolves around a speaking harp fashioned out of a corpse (Adlington 2000, 24–6).

Like Stockhausen and Birtwistle, Partch's interest in emphasizing the bodily in his theatre works sprang partly from the influence of ancient and exotic theatrical traditions. In Partch's case, however, this influence gave rise to a more all-encompassing conviction that musical performance should be thought of as a fundamentally 'corporeal' act – and thus as an antidote to the abstraction and anti-physicality of the machine age (Sheppard 2001, 184). Partch's handcrafted instruments often required particularly marked physical motions on the part of the performer, and it was thus appropriate that the instruments should appear on stage in his music-theatre works *The Bewitched* (1955) and *Delusion of the Fury* (1966). In both pieces the chorus and soloists are given 'bodily', non-verbal vocal sounds rather than 'conceptual' words, and Partch specifies detailed choreography. As Sheppard has observed, the result in each case is a late twentieth-century *Gesamtkunstwerk* (180).

Bodily movements occur in space, and it is perhaps a matter of personal predisposition whether it is the body, or the space articulated by that body, that is seen as primary. The same could be said of sound's relation to space: a sound is qualitatively dependent on the space in which it is made and heard. Space is a third fundamental concern that has led composers to experiments in music theatre. Once again Stockhausen and Birtwistle are important figures. Both composers have been innovative in their use of unorthodox stage placements and movement in their instrumental music. Birtwistle has written a number of 'territorial pieces',

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wherein particular music is 'allotted to a space'. The idea in a piece such as *Verses for Ensembles* (1967) is, in the composer's own words, 'that *that* music happens here, in *this place*, and it doesn't happen in another place' (cited in Adlington 2000, 49). However, Birtwistle uses space largely in order to articulate his musical forms: the musical materials remain primary, and are largely unaffected by the chosen performance venue. The idea that, conversely, music might be used to articulate a space is one taken up more whole-heartedly in Stockhausen's *Alphabet für Liège* (1972). This piece, which is subtitled 'visible music', involves the performing of various theatrical and musical actions in different rooms of a building. As such, the space used is going to exert as much influence on the final product as the sounds made. To this extent, Stockhausen's piece directly foreshadows contemporary installation art.

A more extreme variant on the same idea is presented by Nono's *Prometeo* (1984). In this work, the auditorium takes the form of 'a specially constructed wooden shell providing stations for both performers (singers, speakers, instrumentalists, electronic technicians) and listeners'; the whole space 'would thus become a single musical instrument' (Griffiths 1994, 340–41). Space and sound are made indistinguishable. Paradoxically, Nono's work represents something of a return to the 'pure' listening that music theatre once seemed quite intent on leaving behind, for the composer requests that it should be performed in complete darkness. It is, in Nono's words, a 'tragedy of hearing', or as Griffiths puts it, 'an opera for the ears alone'.

Demise or evolution?

As noted earlier in this chapter, the demise of music theatre is a matter of some debate. Griffiths conceives of the genre as an inherently revolutionary medium; as such, 'it was inevitable that ideas would be exhausted, and that the anti-conventional urge in music theatre would lead to a world in which there were no taboos left to break, except the taboo against going back to tradition' (334). Ligeti, for one, felt that Kagel's music theatre had made possible 'anti-anti-opera' (336), and correspondingly a piece like Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* (1977), while undoubtedly 'more "opera" than opera' (337), is also arguably more 'opera' than music theatre. The revival of interest in opera amongst composers was certainly a remarkable feature of art music in the last two decades of the twentieth century. That said, the fact that composers have begun again to adopt the term 'opera' may simply be a matter of their having established some distance from old opera. It does not necessarily imply a refutation of

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music-theatre principles, which still speak through many of the contemporary operas written today. The seven works that make up Stockhausen's mammoth cycle *Licht* (1977–2003), each named after a day of the week, present a striking example. Stockhausen describes each of these works as an opera, and four have been premiered in opera houses. But in numerous regards they sustain the preoccupations explored so determinedly in Stockhausen's earlier music-theatre works. Instrumentalists feature prominently on stage, and physical gesture is carefully prescribed by the composer, rather than left to the whim of a director. Narrative continuity and direction are gleefully dispensed with, in favour of a 'ragbag' (Griffiths 1995, 245) of musical meditations that accommodates other, semi-autonomous works – such as *Klavierstück XIV* (played by a budgerigar) in *Montag* (1984–8) and the airborne transmissions of the *Helikopter-Streichquartett* in *Mittwoch* (1992–8). The loose mystical thread connecting all seven operas, which concerns the three 'spiritual essences' (Kurtz 1992, 210) – Michael ('the Creator-Angel'), Lucifer (his antagonist) and Eve (the source of mankind's rebirth) – represents a characteristically incautious continuation of music theatre's well-established engagement with existential universals.

A resurgence of interest in narrative and simpler modes of representation is, however, clearly evident amongst younger composers, especially in America and Britain, and this new-found confidence in story-telling makes many of the trappings of music theatre redundant. It is the opportunities afforded by new technologies that appear to hold out most promise of a continuation of some of the principal concerns of music theatre. To the extent that the main thrust behind technological developments is the overcoming of perceived realities and the presentation of 'virtual' alternatives, they have the potential to act as a counterbalance to the realistic and narrativistic tendencies abroad in other sectors of contemporary culture. Steve Reich's recent theatrical works – *The Cave* (1993) and *Three Tales* (2002) – decisively demonstrate how technology can give renewed impetus to the music-theatre tradition. In these works, video recordings, sampled speech, staging and live music, all skilfully combined through computers and click-tracks, contribute to a highly schematic dramatic presentation that unambiguously belongs to the mainstream of late twentieth-century music theatre. New technologies are also central to Heiner Goebbels' music-theatre works. The sampler, specifically, features prominently in *The Repetition* (1995), *Black on White* (1996) and *Hashirigaki* (2000), and it is in some ways symbolic of Goebbels' eclectic, 'pick and mix' theatrical style. The 'postmodern' musical instrument *par excellence* thus encourages a continuation, ironically, of some of the classic preoccupations of modernist music

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theatre: anti-narrativity and non-linearity; the incorporation of references to musics of other cultures and ages; and a 'political' rejection of the conventions of classical music performance (with its fetishization of the 'live' and acoustic). It is in the extension and development of such applications of technology to live performance that the future of music theatre's various preoccupations and motivations most probably resides.

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