



A Case for Disingenuity

Restoring the “inauthentic” to music-theater, weakening the need for novelty, and problematizing the author function are certainly trends within the more experimental areas of contemporary music theater today. The purpose of this essay is not to give a survey of the contemporary opera and music theater scenes, but I do want to briefly name some tendencies that I see as positive, as well as composers who I view as personifying these trends.

Firstly worth mentioning is the breakdown between definitions of curator and composer. This is a trend that is occurring both in Norway and abroad. Norwegian composers such as Eivind Buene and Henrik Helstenius are “composing” concert settings in “pieces” such as Buene’s “Schubert Lounge”. In “Schubert Lounge,” the musical material played is not original. And so the barrier between composer, curator, and arranger are all blurred, which undermines the perceived value of *original* material. Abroad we must mention Heiner Goebbels, whose work was long questioned the boundaries between direction, curation, and composition. Olga Neuwirth is also working to question these lines. Her piece “Homage a Klaus Nomi” is not only an arrangement of other people’s material, but they are *arrangements of arrangements*, since Klaus Nomi didn’t write original material, but rather stylized them.

This rejection of originality has its roots in earlier artists (from Benjamin’s time) such as Marcel Duchamp, and later John Cage. Continuing and extending John Cage’s tradition, artists like choreographer Jonathan Burrows and composer Matteo Fargion in their piece “Cheap Lecture”, named after John Cage’s “Cheap Imitation,” use unoriginality as a kind of raw material, or base. Burrows and Fargion draw attention to the externality of form, and its inhumanity. The result is at once playful and profound.

I also believe that composer Trond Reinholdtsen’s series \emptyset can be viewed as a kind of Brechtian take on the Wagnerian “Gesamtkunstwerk”. Reinholdtsen embraces Wagner’s totalizing form and mythology, but he does so in a way which parodizes its own totality. \emptyset portrays character who represent all aspects of society. But this unifying society-gestalt-formation function is sabotaged. This Wagnerian social function rests on the audience being able to identify with the characters — forming a community around this mass co-identification. But Reinholdtsen’s

characters are unrelatable. Their faces are grotesque. One face appears to be an anus. This creates a Brechtian distance between the audience and the would-be-social-totality, opening up an allegorical chasm.

In other theater forms there are similar movements, from which composers could gain a lot. Maximalist Ann Liv Young's work take myths such as Elektra, or Sleeping Beauty, and sabotage them with interruptions and other devices which make it impossible for the audience to relate to the story. At the end of the performance Ann Liv Young fields questions — any kind of question —, and sells her props. This process demystifies and profanates the piece and also breaks down the “sacred” distance between performer and audience, and leads one to think about the capitalism or other economic structures that lie behind the “illusion” of so much art today.

The problematization of social representation in art, as well as the problematization of the author function in both historical and contemporary work, and the problematization of any identity function in language is crucial in art today. More and more, self-identification through digital representations, and fidelity to these digital representations, become the norm. But it is precisely the near infinite pluralities of representation today that can expose contradiction and falsehood. It is in these moments of exposure — these moments of loss of identity — that we glimpse possibility and the future.