

Dossiê  
Dramaturgia Musical

## **What is Music Theater?**

Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi

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Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi<sup>2</sup>

**Resumo:** Parte do capítulo introdutório do livro *The New Music Theater: Hearing the Voice, Seeing the Body*. Discutem-se possibilidades de compreensão de um novo teatro musical.

**Palavras-chave:** Teatro musical, Ópera, Dramaturgia musical.

**Abstract:** This is an excerpt from *The New Music Theater: Hearing the Voice, Seeing the Body*. Here possibilities for a New Musical Theater are presented.

**Keyword:** Musical Theater, Opera, Musical Dramaturgy.

### Music Theater is the oldest and newest of theater forms.

If you go far enough in any direction, historically or culturally, you eventually arrive at some form of theater based in music and dance. The origins of theater in ritual, religion and myth have been extensively explored and surviving examples can be cited from many cultures. Given the antiquity and ubiquity of these forms, it can be said that singing accompanied by physical movement is at the base of the performing arts family tree. At some unknown point, language – ritualistic or story telling – is added to the mix. The separation of spoken and sung theater (and of dance) was an achievement of Renaissance Europe and is recent in other cultures as well. Opera (the classical European form of sung theater) was established only in the seventeenth century and ballet, as a separate art form, only in the nineteenth. Like opera, prose or spoken theater also has its roots in the Renaissance and comes to dominate all but the most popular forms of theater only in relatively recent times.

As opera breaks away from the other theatrical forms with which it was previously allied, it tends to grow to maximum dimensions in length, in scope, in its performing forces and, inevitably, in cost. Its use of a wide and deep frontal stage with large orchestra pit beneath and its development of certain types of dramaturgy and subject matter all contribute to its growth as a big form. Serious opera is often over the top musically and vocally; it deals with violent material and violent emotions stylized in musical form. “Se-

1 N.E. Este texto é parte do capítulo introdutório do livro *The New Music Theater: Hearing the Voice, Seeing the Body* (Oxford University Press, 2008). Agradeço e muito aos autores, especialmente ao gentil contato com Eric Salzman, que prontamente aceitou o convite da publicação e de participar da Comissão Editorial desta revista.

2 N.E. O norte-americano Eric Salzman é compositor e agitador cultural com larga experiência em promover eventos para apresentação de novas dramaturgias musicais, além do ‘musical americano’ e da tradição operística, como o American Musical Theater Festival. Thomas Desi é compositor, encenador austríaco, diretor artístico do Festival de Teatro Musical do Teatro de Viena.

rious” or tragic opera commonly treats societal taboos and even nightmarish horrors that are normally not allowed to work themselves out in society; so it has a cathartic function for which the omnipresence of music is considered a propos.

In spite of the fact that serious opera deals in extremes, it deals with them in a highly controlled manner. Opera is associated with the *status quo* of society and it has strong conservative tendencies, both in subject matter and in form. These have to be overcome from time to time and this has required periodic renovations and reforms to keep opera from losing its central place in artistic life, to hold on to (or restore) its ability to function dramatically and, eventually, to provide social critique. Historically, these changes have come about through aggressive programs of reform (Gluck, Wagner) or through the infusion of popular forms into the serious opera house – the various forms of comic opera or *opera buffa* which have popular origins and are generally concerned with issues of class, gender and social structure. However, in the mid-twentieth century, due perhaps to the impact of mass media (notably film) and the increasing separation of “high” and popular art, opera seems to have lost its ability to renew itself.

The twentieth century introduced an age of specialization. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* of late romanticism was once more teased apart. In classical, Aristotelian theory, art was believed to derive from the imitation of the real world. Music, notably instrumental music, challenges that view. Under the influence of German idealistic philosophy, music came to be viewed as the purest of the arts and a model for all the arts precisely because – once its ancient connections with language and story telling have been severed – it appears as the most abstract and the least contaminated by the “real world” or by everyday life. Classical music, with its fugues and sonata forms, appears as a veritable fairyland of Platonic ideals. In this universe, which came to be dominated by atonal and non-figurative art, instrumental music is more important than vocal music and concert performance has a much higher status than the theater. Wagner once remarked that having created the invisible orchestra, he now had to invent the invisible theater. The rift between new music and operatic theater – culminating in Boulez’ 1963 interview in *Der Spiegel* in which he suggested that “the most elegant solution would be to explode the opera houses” – appeared to be unbridgeable and perhaps fatal.

The most significant reaction to this came from artists involved with the political left, notably Bertolt Brecht and his various collaborators. Brecht, Kurt Weill and their followers (Eisler and Dessau in Europe; Blitzstein, Bernstein and Sondheim in America) went to the place where the music-theater ideal remained strong: the popular theater of operettas, operas bouffes, musicals, vaudevilles and music hall entertainment. The so-called *Zeitoper* and its theatrical counterparts (Brecht coined the terms *Songspiel* and *Lehrstück*; sometimes the terms “theater opera” or “opera for actors” are used) were anti-opera operas that traded on the political and social issues of the day. These ideas returned after 1968 when political and artistic avant-gardism merged with a new and serious interest in popular forms and also in non-Western art. Roman Haubenstock-Ramati’s “Comedy” is in fact subtitled “Anti-Opera.” Luciano Berio’s “Opera” is a kind of meta-opera as are the John Cage “Europeras”. The appearance of performance and concept art, the new tonalities of the minimalists, and a broad expansion of the idea of vocalism all set the stage for

the development of a new music theater in the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The conflict between the Aristotelian notion of music as mimetic and the Platonic purity of music in idealized and non-representational forms had to be abandoned (or reconciled) before the new music theater could develop. A more useful dialectic might be summarized by contrasting the biological nature of music (primarily as sexual behavior) with its scientific or Pythagorean character. Music theater cannot avoid this conflict. It is obliged to combine the kind of mimesis routinely found in visual and performing arts with the non-mimetic “science” of music just as it may also combine the notion of sexual behavior – as found in popular and world musics everywhere – with the old idea that music can tell its stories.

This last turn of the wheel brings us to the subject matter of this volume. Every revolution of the wheel returns it to the same place but, at the same time, we are further down the road. The revival of music theater was the return of something older than opera itself but also quite new. It happened in many places, often at the same time, sometimes without conscious collusion, sometimes with a very important and explicit exchange of ideas and influences.

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## Music Theater or Opera? Exclusive or Inclusive?

What is music theater? Since this usage, although known in various European languages, is relatively new in English, the question has been often posed in various ways.

Opera is an abbreviated form of a still-current Italian expression, *opera lirica* (or *liriche*) which can be translated as lyric work or works that are sung (opera itself being the plural of opus, the Latin word for ‘work’). The term has been used to represent many “classical” forms of sung theater, even where the connections to European opera are slight (hence “Chinese opera” or “Peking opera”). By extension, popular theatrical forms containing music (some of them older than opera itself), came to be designated operetta (or “little opera”), light opera, comic opera, *opéra comique* or *opéra bouffe*, all somewhat uncomfortable expressions that try to marry terms for relatively small-scale popular or comic (i.e. non-tragic) art with a word whose historically developed character is closely connected with the notions of “big” and “grand.”

In any case, the term opera has not always been universally appreciated, even for serious work. The creators of popular forms as well as opera reformers and innovators often preferred other terms – musical comedy, musical, *Singspiel*, *dramma per musica*, *dramma giocosa*, lyric drama and so forth. Wagner, who associated the word “opera” with Meyerbeer and the Italians, referred to his work as music dramas. Brecht, who disliked opera and wanted to draw on the popularity of musical theater, invented terms like *Singspiel* and *Lehrstück* and essentially broke with Kurt Weill over the operatic dimensions of “Mahagonny”.

The term “music theater” is full of problems. In English, it is essentially a coinage taken from the Germanic form *Musiktheater* which can refer to a building but which also came to rest for a while as the designation for a kind of instrumental or instrumental/vocal avant-garde performance associated with composers like Karlheinz Stockhausen and

Mauricio Kagel. In the English-speaking world it was originally associated with a kind of neo-Brechtian sung theater but it has been widely appropriated for any kind of serious musical theater. Ironically, the old term ‘musical comedy’ has virtually disappeared and on Broadway and in London’s West End, modern musicals are as likely to be designated as “music theater” as anything else.

In short, “music theater” has come to have two opposing uses: one inclusive, the other particular and exclusive. The inclusive meaning of the term can encompass the entire universe of performance in which music and theater play complementary and potentially equal roles. In this sense, opera is merely a particular (and historical) form of music theater. MTV might be another.

However when we say “new music theater” in this book, we generally mean to use the term in a way that excludes traditional opera, operetta and musicals. This meaning is partly historical but mostly categorical. New music theater can be compared to modern dance; it is in an evolutionary place akin to where modern dance was in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In other contexts, it has sometimes been designated as fringe or experimental opera or even as the off-Broadway of opera. Since it is in mid-evolution and comprises different streams and styles, it is most easily defined by what it is not: not-opera and not-musical. Music theater is theater that is music driven but organized by different principles, performed by different performers and in a different social ambiance than works normally categorized as operas (performed by opera singers in opera houses) or musicals (performed by theater singers in “legitimate” theaters).

## Does the archetype hold in all forms from the most traditional to the most contemporary?

These lines are not always very easy to define. What if a work or a performance requires a mixed cast of singers? What happens when a musical is performed in an opera house or an opera appears on Broadway? The movement from theater to opera house is a kind of appropriation and institutionalization of works that might have had quite different origins and even different meanings. Without any viable in-between, a work that began as a literary or theatrical protest may be appropriated to represent something very different in the opera house. Mozart’s “*Die Zauberflöte*” started life as a *Singspiel* or musical comedy and retains number form with spoken dialogue even in the opera house. The Bizet “Carmen” was originally a serious *opéra comique* with spoken dialogue (the recitatives that turned it into a full-blown opera were written by someone else) and the work has been turned back into music theater several times. “Parsifal” was written as a festival music drama and was not supposed to be performed anywhere except the Bayreuth *Festspielhaus*; today, like all the Wagnerian music dramas, it is just opera (it’s origins are revealed only the tradition that, in certain houses at least, there is applause and curtain calls only for the secular second act). Stephen Sondheim’s “Sweeney Todd” started life as serious musical theater but has turned into an opera and had to be rescued for the theater in a recent production by being recast in a post-Brechtian music-theater style production (in which the actors play musical instruments!). The argument over whether “Mahagon-

ny” was an opera or not essentially caused the break-up of the Weill/Brecht collaboration (they collaborated only once more in Paris); ironically, history seems to have decided that it is an opera.

Evidently, contemporary opera, music theater in its various forms and the modern musical co-exist on a continuum and the lines between them are often blurred. But because categories are fuzzy at the edges (as they are in species evolution) does not mean that valid categories do not exist (as they clearly do). Because the boundaries are hard to define should not lead us to deny that differences exist – differences of purpose, of category, of social setting, of casting and vocal type. The common element is that, in all these types, music drives the theater or, at the very least, music, language, vocalization and physical movement exist and interact in some kind of equality. A recurrent theme throughout this book is the question of what music theater has been, is or might be. Thus we often return to early or non-Western forms of music theater and performance art. This is not merely a return to origins but also an attempt to find universals untainted perhaps by the recent domination of traditional Western forms of operas and musicals. This will also be an attempt to sketch the shadowy history of anti-opera or, perhaps, “alternate opera,” a species of evolving music-theater with a difficult but inspiring past and whose story is still being written.

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Eric Salzman has been involved in the development of new music theater for close to a half century as a composer, writer and artistic director. His major current project is “Big Jim & the Small-time Investors” about an L.A. scam artist who cons investors into believing that his virtual-reality machine will realize their wildest fantasies. Another recent work, “Jukebox in the Tavern of Love”, a modern madrigal comedy commissioned and recorded by the Western Wind (libretto by Valeria Vasilevski), takes place in a New York bar during a storm and blackout; it has been recorded by Labor/Naxos and released together with a new piece of Meredith Monk. Also on this label are Salzman’s “The Nude Paper Sermon” for actor and Renaissance ensemble, “Civilization & Its Discontents” (with Michael Sahl), “Wiretap”, “Helix”, “Larynx Music” and “Queens Collage”. He has written extensively on new music and music-theater and is currently composer-in-residence with the Center for Contemporary Opera. Further information about Salzman and his work can be found on his web site [www.ericSalzman.com](http://www.ericSalzman.com).

Thomas Desi is a stage director and author from Vienna. He is founder and artistic director of the ZOOM Musiktheater company in Vienna, founder and artistic co-director of Musiktheatertage Wien Festival, and founder of Freie Musiktheater Wien. Desi has appeared at festivals such as Ars Electronica Linz, Earport Mainz, JUTA Düsseldorf, Mou-



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