

Music in Theatre: Developing a Theatrical Musicology

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Note: This is the second chapter of my honours thesis paper. The preceding chapter examined the context of the theatre in terms of techniques and technologies, and argued that they were elements that a theatrical composer must acknowledge in the composition. The remaining two chapters dissect four theatrical compositions (by Mendelssohn, Grieg, Britten, and Previn) in terms of their relationship with the theatrical process and environment. This chapter aims to develop a methodology for this analysis by drawing on existing musicological schools and discussing the suitability of the theory to an application to theatrical music.

Although it is a discipline with a rich history and a complex set of conventions and practices, music written specifically for theatrical performance has been largely overlooked by musicology. This paper argues that this is not the result of a weakness or unsuitability of the musical content, but due to the specific challenges presented by musical theatricality to a musicological analysis. For the confined scope of this paper, dramatic music can be defined as music that is performed within the context of a theatrical space. Although this definition can include specifically musical genres such as Opera, Melodrama and Musical Theatre, this paper will focus primarily on music written as part of otherwise 'conventional' theatre performance.

'The Theatre' is a complex environment, providing a rich seam of information to many disciplines. For the anthropologist or ethnographer it presents a richly hierarchical environment backstage, while the building acts as a 'liminal space'¹ during performance. For the electrician, engineer or mechanic the environment offers both simplicity and complexity of systems to be negotiated and utilised. For the dramatist it offers endless potential and imagination. And for the musician it offers... what? An opportunity to be "of secondary importance to the speech"²? To play in an environment that is "cramped [and] packed close together"³?

Understanding this practical side of the theatre, as experienced by the musicians, is vital to our understanding of the music it produces. The environment has several peculiar features which impact acoustically and musically, and so merit examination. The orchestra 'pit' is clearly the major factor in

¹ Victor Turner, "Betwixt and between: The liminal period in rites of passage," *Betwixt and between: Patterns of masculine and ...* (1987), <http://books.google.com.au/books?id=Y0h00Ee19pcC>.

² Jane Bellingham, "Incidental Music," ed. Alison Latham, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, n.d., http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e3406?q=incidental+music&search=quick&pos=3&_start=1.

³ Norman O'Neill, "Music to Stage Plays," *Proceedings of the Musical Association* 37 (1910): 85-102, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/765702>. pp98

the theatre musician's life: the musician will spend the entire show in this place, usually in the dark. The orchestra pit developed from a fenced-off area in front of the stage. De rigueur in early theatre, the orchestra 'pit' was simply an area at the front of the stalls at floor level where the orchestra sat, a configuration that is still found in many opera houses⁴. These stalls, and indeed the entire house, were lit from above throughout the performance. Wagner, in the construction of his theatre at Bayreuth, revolutionised the theatre in two ways: he plunged the entire theatre into darkness⁵, and he buried the orchestra pit below and beneath the stage⁶. This convention quickly spread to dramatic theatres, and by the twentieth century the pit had become a standard theatrical feature. Mark Lubbock, writing in 1957, remarks that "in a Theatre the orchestra should always be hidden", and cites dramatic reasons: "Otherwise the lights and movements of the conductor and players intervening between the audience and the stage prove very distracting. Apart from this, hidden music greatly adds to the illusion."⁷ However, this dramatic impact, while vital, means the requirements of the performing musicians are sidelined: the pit is dark, has a "long narrow shape" where cramped musicians are "packed close together"⁸, and is a perfect receptacle for dust and debris rolling off the stage.

The other main working environment for the theatrical musician is the stage itself. Throughout the development of theatre, productions have utilised "Instrumentalists [who] also appeared on the stage and in costume"⁹ as part of the drama. Although these on-stage musicians were occasionally separate players (local military bands were popular¹⁰) they were usually drawn from the available musicians in the pit. Negotiating passage from a pit to the stage usually involves dealing with several sound-locks, avoiding delicate or high voltage electrical equipment, dealing with cumbersome or uncomfortable costumes, and scaling the set, often with a valuable musical instrument in tow. The backstage area is a dangerous space, with many regulations to prevent injury, and entering at the wrong time can be very dangerous¹¹. Counterweight systems, suspending hundreds of tonnes of theatrical equipment, move around the stage in every dimension. Occasionally objects will be 'flown' over the pit, causing much consternation to the busy musicians beneath.

As well as the working environment, the literary environment—the script and score—presents unique challenges to the theatrical musician. Having the music interact with dialogue and action necessitates the construction of intricate and complex musical mechanisms. This genre has built up a distinct vocabulary of terms and techniques as a foundation which must be understood before approaching the more aesthetic elements of the composition. Techniques such as Vamping (the repetition of a short passage of music as a buffer to allow for flexibility of acting or stagecraft), Underscoring (referring to music which plays underneath dialogue and action without 'locking in' or

⁴ Such as the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

⁵ Alex Ross, "The rest is noise: Listening to the twentieth century" (2007).

⁶ A. Lavnac, "Cross-section of the orchestra pit at Bayreuth, c1900: after A. Lavnac, 'The Music Dramas of Wagner and his Festival Theatre in Bayreuth'," *Grove Music Online* ((New York, 1902), n.d.).

⁷ Mark Lubbock, "Music Incidental to a Play," *The Musical Times* 98, no. 1369 (1957): 128-131, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/936528>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ John Spitzer and Neal Zaslaw, "Orchestra," *Grove Music Online*, n.d.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Helena Wulff, *Ballet across borders : career and culture in the world of dancers* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 1998).

standing on its own: It is usually not heard by the characters onstage.¹²), and Melodramas (a musical form which integrates tightly with dialogue or action, relying on spoken cues to alternate music and speech) present a musical vocabulary which responds to the specific requirements of the form. The problem presented to musicologists is the incorporation of these extra-musical elements into a musical analysis without ignoring the traditional musical elements or transitioning into a literary, sociological, or journalistic study of the general theatrical experience.

Despite the limitations that theatre technology and dramatic construction have upon theatrical music, it is still an important source of musical material and ideas. However, all of this musical output is completely dependent on all of the other elements of the theatrical form. Philip Auslander, a performance theorist, argues that an object (a composition) fundamentally changes when its medium (its context) is transformed¹³, and that therefore a piece of music composed for the theatre, looked at outside of its theatrical context is no longer the same complete work. This becomes problematic in musicological analyses of 'great theatrical compositions' which ignore theatrical origins entirely. This then raises the question: can we still see these compositions as complete works of art? Are they 'worthy' of dissection and analysis, or are they somehow diminished through their entanglement with other art-forms? Personally, I would argue that these works are enriched through their entanglement. Consequently there is a need for a broadened methodology that can examine this kind of work within the context from which it emerges, being able to take into account its most important feature: that it takes place in a theatre.

In establishing a new methodology for theatrical musicological analysis, we must first explore the potential contribution of established musicological theories to this field. Particularly, there is a need to evaluate the impact the theatrical context could have upon the musical theory presented. By exploring a representative sample of a few key musicological movements this section will evaluate the effectiveness of each movement at allowing for the context of theatricality. This selective review of pre-existing literature will also aim to ascertain which elements are particularly important to each school, and therefore the compatibility of each school of thought with the elements of theatrical music deemed important by this paper.

To do this we will discuss three general approaches to musicology: Positivism, the 'New' musicology, and Ethnomusicology. By discussing these general theories in relation to theatricality I hope to be able to assess the possible contribution of each field to a theatrical musicology. In addition to established musicological frameworks this paper will briefly examine the possible contribution of an alternative perspective: theatre or performance studies. This set of external methodologies is capable of examining theatrical performance, but may not be equipped to deal with the crucial musicological aspects of this area.

As one of the first efforts to codify any musical methodology, Positivism has had a special significance in the history of musical analysis. As the method which founded the musicological discipline with the publication of "The Scope, Method and Aim of Musicology" in 1885 by Guido

¹² Deena Kaye and James LeBrecht, *Sound and music for the theatre: the art and technique of design*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Focal Press, 2009).

¹³ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a mediatized culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), <http://books.google.com/books?id=aEQxSZ0s8V0C>.

Adler¹⁴, this brand of structural, analyses-based writing has been the foundation stone of 'traditional' musicology.

A fundamental premise of a structural musicology such as this is that all the needed musical information is contained within the score. Although Adler allows that musical information may exist outside the notated form, he is adamant that it must be defined palaeographically in order that the musicologist may study it. "If it is not written in our notation, it must be transcribed."¹⁵ Any analysis must then be based upon the notated structural nature of the work. This premise, which we may take as fundamental to traditional musicology, becomes problematic when dealing with the idiosyncrasies of incidental music.

As briefly outlined above, theatrical music rarely follows the conventions of regular music as it is written with external stimulus and cannot be examined in isolation. While positivism provides many practical avenues for music analysis, theatrical music moves beyond its limited criteria. Positivism can be seen as focussing primarily on melodic, harmonic, and structural form, elements which are radically transformed in theatrical music. This genre will frequently present music that has no distinct 'melody' (particularly in atmospheric cues), providing limited material for detailed analysis. Similarly, harmonies can often be basic or repetitive, providing a foundation which does not necessarily provide the perceived necessary complexity to be subjected to positivistic analyses. Positivism also finds difficulties when dealing with theatrical musical structure. As musical structure is so flexible and unpredictable in the theatre (due to vamps, safeties and melodramas) it becomes impractical to draw inflexible structural conclusions from the notated score. The unknown length of rests, the variation of tempo, and the addition of spoken parts all provide elements which are not concrete enough for an empirically musical 'science'¹⁶. While positivist musicology provides a useful framework for examining notated music (under which most theatrical 'great works' can be categorised) it does not seem up to the task of dealing with the flexibility and unpredictability inherent in theatrical practice.

Having discussed the dramaturgical limitations of a formalist approach to the analysis of music, we are left to evaluate the extent to which this methodology is equipped to account for the extra elements which exist outside the score. By consciously limiting itself to score-based analysis, positivism is ill-equipped to deal with the interpretive and spontaneous aspects of this musical genre, and although it provides a useful tradition for musical empiricism, it lacks the interpretive or imaginative strand that this genre calls for.

'New' Musicology was the buzzword for a collection of mid twentieth-century musicological explorations which sought to include contextual and literary information in a discipline which was felt to have become too 'source based'.¹⁷ It can be seen as a development of traditional musicology (rather than a parallel discipline) which allows for the presentation of musicological 'interpretations'

¹⁴ Erica Mugglestone and Guido Adler, "Guido Adler's 'The Scope, Method and Aim of Musicology' (1885): An English Translation with an Historico-Analytical Commentary," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 13 (1981): 1-21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/768355>.

¹⁵ Ibid. p6

¹⁶ Ibid. p9

¹⁷ David Fallows, "new musicology," ed. Alison Latham, *The Oxford Companion to Music* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e4712>.

rather than 'positivisms'.¹⁸ While it does not exclude "note-by-note analysis"¹⁹ it usually steers away from this, preferring to explore the social and cultural 'meaning' of musical elements. It presents itself as a very flexible methodology incorporating 'extra-musical' elements or disciplines. In particular it takes on a role as a musicology which is able to interact fully with theories in other departments of arts or social sciences: literary theory, postmodern thought, "issues of race, gender construction and sexuality" are all "in".²⁰ It is this liberated musicology which could provide the second avenue for the development of a theatrical musicology.

The most important element of this theoretical school, at least for the requirements of this paper, is the openness with which it approaches the discipline. As it allows for the inclusion of textual analysis—such as lyrics or libretto—it is implicitly open to an examination of the extra-musical elements of a theatrical production in a musicological context. It also introduces the discipline to mainstream academic debate, where most theatrical, literary, and performance discourse has developed. Because of this multi-disciplinary approach, 'New' Musicology is able to "deal with matters of affect and expression"²¹ as well as incorporate the literary or textual elements of the play into a musicological understanding.

This has been criticised as a very literary approach to music²² which could cause possible problems when dealing with music as experienced in performance. Just as literary scholars have dealt with the differences between script and performance, musicology needs to address this divide. 'New' Musicologists seem comfortable in dealing with cultural elements that go into the composition of a score²³, but less adept at dealing with the elements that go into a performance. Like 'traditional' musicologists, 'new' musicologists like to deal with artefacts such as scores or libretti, and while meaning can be derived from these they do not provide a complete representation of the performance.

'New' Musicology has further disadvantages when dealing with environmentally implicated theatre. It tends to focus on music as 'representative' of cultural meaning, moving away from evidence and analysis in the traditional sense. This can result in writing which moves away from the specifics of an individual work and into generalised cultural or contextual analysis. It is also possible for writing in this movement to focus upon music as a *representative of* extra-musical factors, as opposed to exploring the relationships between such factors and the work. For a genre that is part of a complex external or cultural system, as ours is, this could perhaps fail to address relevant *musical* issues of construction and performance by exploring the periphery rather than addressing core problems. New Musicology seems particularly well suited to an application to Opera or to Lieder.²⁴ In these musical forms the combination of text and music can be more thoroughly explored through the literary influences of the musicology. These interactions, while crucial to the understanding of

¹⁸ Kofi Agawu, "Analyzing Music under the New Musicological Regime," *Journal of Musicology* 15, no. 3 (1997): 297-307. pp301

¹⁹ Ibid. pp302

²⁰ Ibid. pp301

²¹ Ibid. pp299

²² Ibid. pp302

²³ Philip Gossett, "History and Works That Have No History: Reviving Rossini's Neapolitan Operas," in *Disciplining Music*, ed. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman, paperback. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 95-115.

²⁴ Ibid.

textual genres such as *Lieder*, is perhaps not comprehensive enough to encompass all of the facets of musically integrated performance.

Despite these weaknesses, 'New' Musicology does contribute one important concept to our ideal theatrical theory of music. By looking at the formal musical elements in simultaneity with the literary components, it enables musicologists to incorporate a more comprehensive set of data into their investigation, without the "surplus of detail that theory-based analysis produces".²⁵

An alternative approach to the study of theatrical music is an ethnomusicological one. In broad terms, ethnomusicology can be defined as the study of musical cultures. This conventionally ranges from the examination of musical output to a more sociological analysis of the societies or groups from which the music emerges. In this discipline we can see a marked attitude shift from traditional musicology in that it views music as a product, rather than as an aesthetic entity. It can be seen as a hybrid discipline, with researchers having training in "music or in anthropology, sometimes in both."²⁶ Although it is a wide-ranging discipline, activities can include the collection, transcription, and categorisation of folk songs, 'native' tribes' cultural output (including music and dance), orally transmitted music, and in more recent times, popular music.²⁷ This methodological net has at various times been widened to also examine traditional 'art' music and musical history, and in recent years has moved away from a preoccupation with the "exotically removed 'other'" towards a focus on "living music", presenting "both 'culture' and 'fieldwork' as problematics rather than givens".²⁸

Rather than trying to discern 'fundamentals' of the music itself, ethnomusicology instead looks at the people who create, reproduce or consume music. Because of this, ethnomusicology feels more comfortable interacting with disciplines other than musical analysis. A core methodology, at least of traditional ethnomusicology, is the process of fieldwork. This is a method which can also be seen in ethnography, anthropology, and sociology, and relies on observation and the experiences of the observer, rather than analytical frameworks or experimental variables. While the individual methods and approaches can vary greatly within fieldwork, ethnomusicology marks a discipline which breaks free from the 'tyranny of the text' and examines other social and cultural signifiers. As discussed above, both traditional musicology and new musicology are largely bound by the constraints of literary and textual analysis. Before dealing with performance, improvisation or contexts they require transposition into a written medium. Ethnomusicology provides a method of analysing a work without the need for Western transcription, able to incorporate non-text-based information into an academic study.

An ethnomusicological approach allows investigators to examine the society from which the music emerges, which in this case is the social and physical environment of the theatrical complex. This represents a marked shift, as the extra-musical or sociological factors of theatrical composition can be incorporated into an academic discussion. However, in making this shift musicology moves away from the score and the script. This could leave it incapable of dealing adequately with the written musical elements laid down by the composer and playwright, which could therefore be seen to

²⁵ Agawu, "Analyzing Music under the New Musicological Regime." pp304

²⁶ Carole Pegg et al., "Ethnomusicology," *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/52178>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

examine only the peripheries of the theatrical form, ignoring the written core that underpins the theatrical endeavour.²⁹

Perhaps because of this anthropological strain within ethnomusicology, there is a certain tension between ethnomusicology and documentary sources such as scripts or libretti. Although comparative musicology, the precursor to ethnomusicology, was established along the same text-analysis methodologies as historical musicology³⁰ it tends to see written subjects as transcriptions of live events or social situations. This methodology, therefore, does not necessarily work with the kind of documentary evidence we are presented with as a part of a theatrical musicology: scores and scripts. While some scores may be edited *post facto* to reflect the idiosyncrasies of the performance, the majority of scores and scripts are intended as precursors, aimed at shaping and guiding the performance. This raises problems when examining historical performance because a performance is an inherently less fixed object than a score or script. This transience makes it difficult for an ethnomusicologist to attempt 'fieldwork' upon an 1829 theatrical performance without ignoring sources such as the score and focussing instead upon cultural ephemera such as programmes, reviews and budgetary figures. While these sources may be informative and interesting, they do not furnish a musicologist with data about the construction and creation of the music itself. While it can tell us the names and pay-scales of the individual performers, and give some sense of the success of the performance through critical journalism, we are unable to answer how a certain motif or technique was handled in performance. Because the vast majority of theatrical performances have occurred outside a feasible fieldwork timescale (i.e. in the past) we are faced with the problem of producing specifically musical results within this methodology. Although some have argued that these problems can be reconciled, it seems that the limitations of an ethnomusicological approach to theatrical music create obstacles to a comprehensive analysis of this specifically western theatricality. However, the strengths of an ethnomusicological approach balance the weaknesses of the historical and literary musicological approaches (and *vice versa*), as ethnomusicology incorporates the contexts and motivations of musical creation and is able to explore the social and cultural influences upon the studied musical 'artefacts'.

Performance Studies can be seen as a non-musicological effort to study live performance through academic frameworks such as semiotics, ethnography, phenomenology, sociology, and anthropology.³¹ It is a hybrid discipline which draws ideas from many other disciplines within the humanities in order to approach the execution and development as a primarily social activity. It shares many elements with ethnomusicology, and draws from many of the same sources, but lacks the musical focus inherent in ethnomusicology. Although it draws from certain literary traditions of examination it is a primarily non-literate subject, examining real-world occurrences and interactions with the focus on acknowledged or unacknowledged performances.

The main benefits an approach such as performance or theatre studies can supply to a musicological approach to the theatre is a fluency and comfort with the implications of the theatrical environment. In particular several key writings discuss the impact that the social and physical environment has on

²⁹ Paul Atkinson, *Everyday arias : an operatic ethnography* (Lanham; Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2006).

³⁰ Mugglestone and Adler, "Guido Adler's 'The Scope, Method and Aim of Musicology' (1885): An English Translation with an Historico-Analytical Commentary."

³¹ Chair of the Department of Performance Studies, "Department of Performance Studies," *The University of Sydney*, 2011.

the development and perceptions of theatrical works. Particularly useful for a dissection of non-contemporary musical performance is Tiffany Stern's exploration of historical rehearsal and development processes³². By using the traditional tools of the historian and theatre scholar she recreates the rehearsal environment in a variety of different theatrical environments. Unfortunately, without a special study it is sometimes difficult to infer the role that music took within the rehearsal process. She suggests that "roles were learnt in isolation not only from other performers, but from the rest of the play"³³. From this we can assume that music, and composition, functioned in a similar way: a composer would rehearse any music with the musicians only, putting everything together only at the last minute. It is perhaps for this reason that Shakespeare places his musical cues so overtly, "refer[ing] to it in the text, or when it is not referred to by one of the characters it is usually introduced in a perfectly natural way and at a point where music can be legitimately used."³⁴ This clarity of construction could imply that, like the actors, musicians did not 'workshop' their parts and relied upon obvious verbal and visual cues to interject their music with little collaborative preparation.

Like dramatic rehearsal, musical rehearsal is not a product of some mystical process, but represents a concerted effort and dedicated approach to what can be seen as *work*. Performance Studies is particularly experienced with exploring this aspect, and many writers choose to explore the personal commitment and effort put in by theatrical (and occasionally musical³⁵) practitioners. Helena Wulff explores the personal exertions of members within an esteemed ballet company, although there is very little observation of the obvious musical components of the balletic world³⁶.

In developing a musicological approach for the examination of theatrical compositions I have argued for a synthesis of pre-existing musicological methodologies into a hybrid analytic approach. This aims to synthesise more generalised literary and theatre study methodologies—such as those found in other branches of the humanities—with a close musicological and technical examination of the 'text' of the music, drawing from traditional structural forms of musicology and used in past positivistic analyses of theatrical works. This aims to conjoin the musical 'content' with the musical 'context' to create an image of a work which reflects the unique circumstances out of which it arose. This 'super-theory' could therefore combine the in-depth musical analysis of the score, the literary examination of textual and musical elements of the composition, and the cultural or social consequences of the involvement of the theatrical experience. This can therefore examine both the important elements contained within the musical score, as well as the effect and affect this has upon the theatrical work and upon the audience in performance. In a concluding simplification, the key factors that contribute to musical meaning within the theatrical world can be seen as the music, the playtext, and the performance. A musicological approach to theatrical music should aim to address these three elements and the relationships between them, as well as to explore the relationship between the music (which must always remain central within the musicological discourse) and the play for which the work is written.

³² Tiffany Stern, *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³³ *Ibid.* pp10

³⁴ O'Neill, "Music to Stage Plays."

³⁵ Atkinson, *Everyday arias : an operatic ethnography*.

³⁶ Wulff, *Ballet across borders : career and culture in the world of dancers*.

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