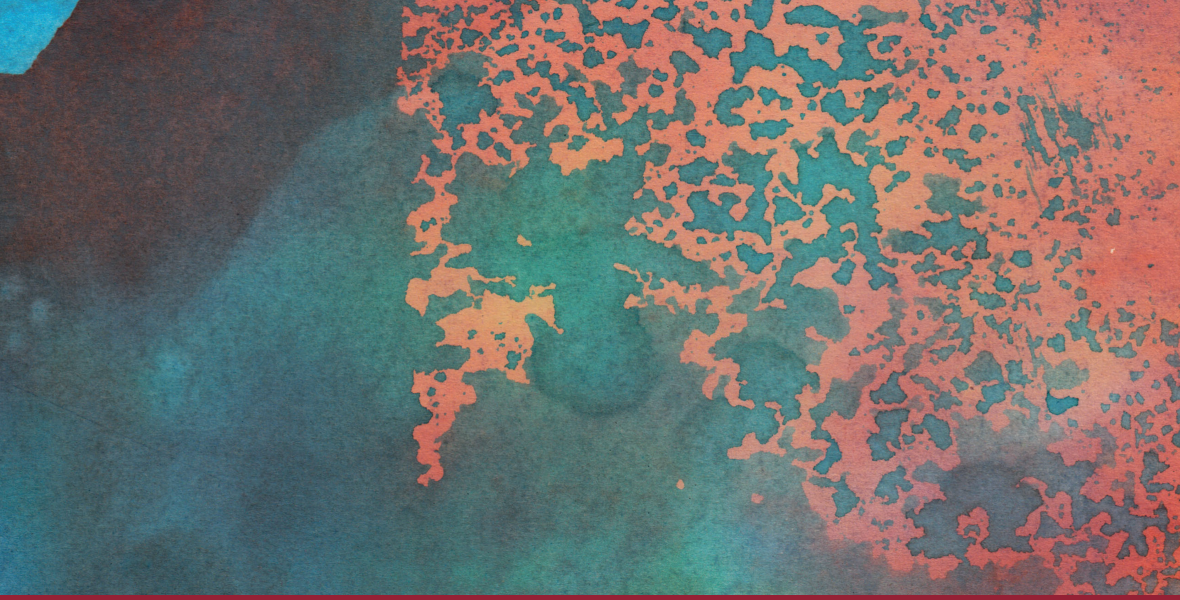
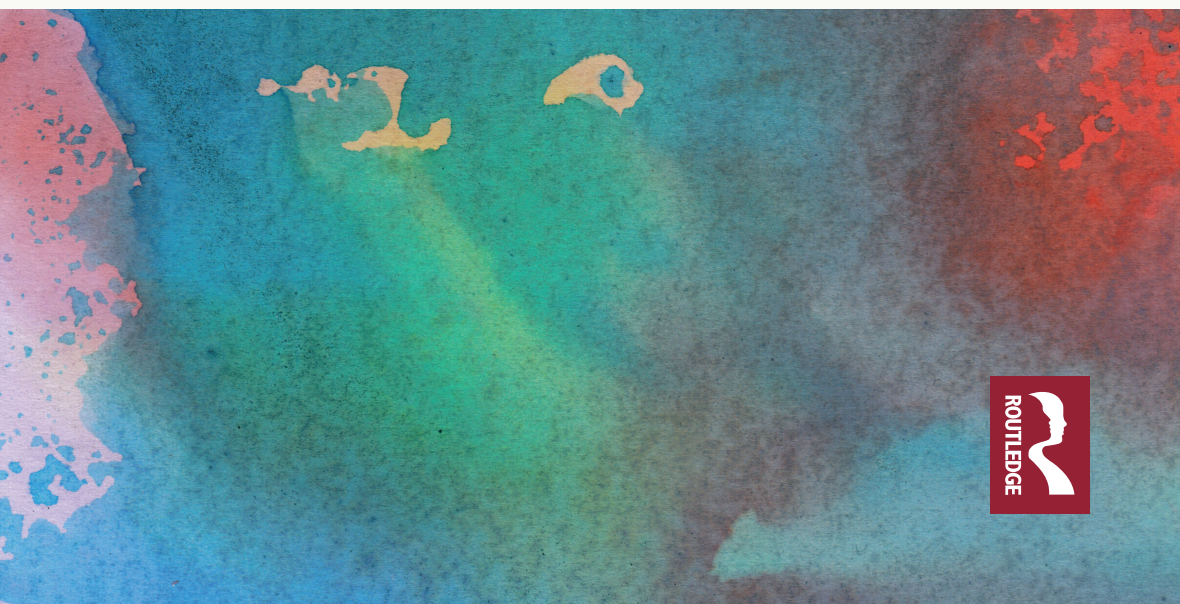


Routledge Advances in Theatre & Performance Studies

MUSIC AND SOUND IN EUROPEAN THEATRE

PRACTICES, PERFORMANCES, PERSPECTIVES

Edited by David Roesner and Tamara Yasmin Quick



Music and Sound in European Theatre

The need for a research volume on European theatre music and sound is almost self-evident.

Musical and sonic practices have been an integral part of theatre ever since the artform was first established 2,500 years ago: not just in subsequent genres that are explicitly driven by music, such as opera, operetta, ballet, or musical theatre, but in all kinds of theatrical forms and conventions. Conversely, academic recognition of the role of theatre music, its aesthetics, creative processes, authorships, traditions, and innovations is still insufficient. This volume unites experts from different disciplines and backgrounds to make a significant contribution to the much-needed discourse on theatre music. The term itself is a shapeshifter that signifies different phenomena at different times: the book thus deliberately casts a wide net to explore both the highly contextual terminologies and the many ways in which different times and cultures understand 'theatre music'. By treating theatre music as a practice, focusing on its role in creating and watching performances, the book appeals to a wide range of readerships: researchers and students of all levels, journalists, audiences, and practitioners.

It will be useful to universities and conservatoires alike and relevant for many disciplines in the humanities.

David Roesner is a Professor for Theatre and Music Theatre at the LMU Munich, Germany.

Tamara Yasmin Quick works as a Munich-based dramaturg, lecturer, associate researcher, and project coordinator at various academic and artistic institutions.

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Music and Sound in European Theatre

Practices, Performances, Perspectives

Edited by
David Roesner and Tamara Yasmin Quick

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Contents

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Foreword

Ross Brown

Such a simple pairing: theatre and music: two familiar words, two primal forms of human culture. We should not be surprised that the dialectic within this pairing remains so un-simple that scholarly books continue to ask what it means and gloss it with new ideas, contexts, and applications. For millennia people have taken twelve notes, a few performers, and a space and arranged them in front of a group of aurally alert spectators in order to entertain, educate, inspire, baffle, and tease them, and so it continues. Meanwhile, the twine of musical and dramatic metaphor and figuration has been woven into human language, philosophy, and understanding. From its inception, drama has mirrored a world whose metaphysical principles of love, order, chaos, and divine reward or retribution, have been set out in musical terms for want of a better language. Drama is a musical form not only in the way it sounds but in its ontological construct.

And so it continues. All the world's a stage, which music connects to the metaphysical, however, that may contemporaneously be understood. Once it would, of course, have been unimaginable that the world's stage would be extended by technology and algorithmic dramaturgy, into a human-made virtual dimension. Thirty years ago, it would have seemed like a paranoid fantasy to imagine personalised daily dramas, constructed by jeopardies, intrigues, and desires served to us through news and social media channels, or that our lives would be accompanied by music selected by artificial intelligences that scan our preferences and habits. Today's cultural weather perhaps, rather than a historical climatic shift, but it is always worth considering that while theatre and music are ancient terms delineated by tradition, their compasses are magnetised by the living world. Part of their work is to orientate whatever currently feels strange and modern within their sense of cultural continuum, their historical arcs of harmony, rhythm, and unified time and place. I argue that any composer, sound designer, or student of theatre benefits not only from an understanding of how Boethius' 6th-century music-theory-shaped 16th-century dramaturgy, but also from asking themselves what is similarly shaping the dramaturgy of today's intermedial theatres. 'Siri, play me music to work to, to train to, to laugh to, to cry to, to contemplate nothingness to'. 'Alexa, play me sound effects to help me sleep'.

I walk to the bus stop and pass children dancing to phones propped up on their school bags, making TikTok videos for their stories. Music/theatre is not simple dialectic, but it also plays out in the everyday, in plain sight.

So what of theatre music and its study today? Not only on a technological level but also in terms of form and aesthetics, it is a subject that cannot meaningfully be taken separately from questions of sound design, for we live in a 24-hour electroacoustic world. But where music theory is ancient and quadrivial, discourse on sound design is recent. To my knowledge, its first regular forum was an email group of professionals and educators in the early days of the internet called the Theatre Sound Listserv,[1] several years before theatre's sound and aurality became part of theatre's academic discourse. Even now many people would, I think, consider it a technical adjunct to music, whereas I argue it is firmly part of music's subject, and that it comes to theatre is as part of music's relationship.

At the point I joined the Listserv group, around 1994, I was a composer of theatre music, in my early thirties. I had worked as a musician and sound operator in theatre for ten years, but despite having recently been asked by a London drama school to run a new sound design degree program, had only a handful of professional credits that used the formulation 'sound design'. This was partly because outside of musical theatre – in dramatic theatre for want of a better term – the billing 'sound designer' was relatively scarce. Moreover, the kind of sound design I did, involved not only recorded sound effects, but also abstract musical sounds – drones, chordal progressions, and even tunes – composed and played on MIDI keyboards and other instruments and mixed in with the sounds of recognisable things and actions. At the time there was no consensus in the theatre industry about whether such work was sound design or music composition, and it was variously credited to as 'sound score by', 'soundscape by', and so on. I am not entirely sure even now there is total clarity around the term – more recently, in film and computer games, the term sound design has also come to mean other things, such as designing individual sounds within wholly digital environments. However, the study and research of theatre sound and music is now more established if not entirely mainstream, as the different perspectives on recent theatre music in this book attest. There is, though, still a sense of a discipline mapping itself, trying to find its permanent footing, wanting to be better understood and theoretically delineated, and arguing to be more institutionally valued.

That this should be the case for a fundamental component of theatre and primal strand of theatre history is interesting, and has been a recurring topic within this discourse. Is it the symptom of epistemology's visual hegemony, it has been asked, or of a literary bias that favours orality over aurality. It is now over a century since that brief interlude in late 19th-/early 20th-century literary theatre, when drama fell musically silent. Perhaps this interlude performed a distaste for the melodrama that had gone before – melo-drama being music-drama – or perhaps it performed a modernist existentialism, a disconnection from the classical music of the spheres and Romantic utopia of

natural harmony. The pause in the melo, however, was brief and drama soon reverted to the musical state that had pertained through most theatre history. It is now once again the exception rather than the rule for a 'serious' piece of dramatic theatre not to have music about it and within it.

Ours is now an electroacoustic age. It would be absurd now to object to a redefinition of music accordingly. Dylan is no longer Judas for playing electrically. Actors now routinely wear radio mics for spoken drama to allow their voices to be balanced and mixed with loudspeaker music, not necessarily because the actors need amplification or reinforcement, but because the electroacoustic sounds different from the acoustic, and this is a contrast that can be explored artistically. And so once again we need to ask: what is theatre music? What is it now? My mind goes back to a specific thread on that Listserv, at some point between 1994 and 1996,[2] concerning the recent sonic/musical turn in drama. Questions of nomenclature can seem pointless, but this turn was necessitating new contracts, union memberships, programme billings, budget lines, department titles, and theatre signage, not to mention the degree programmes, all of which now featured some variation of the words sound, music, score or design. As far as these markers of institutional arrival were concerned, somebody asked, should two distinct types of theatre sound design not now be officially delineated? Were there not obviously two distinct roles here, both currently covered by the umbrella 'sound designer'? There had been technical sound reinforcement system design, the more established kind, mainly for musical, but now there was also this compositional sound design, a kind of concrete musical scenography that had arisen through experimental and alternative theatre in the late 1980s. Everyone agreed it was hard to describe, but you knew it when you heard it.

If you read the director Peter Sellars foreword to Kaye and LeBrecht's textbook *Sound and Music for Theatre* (1992), this is the kind he is talking about. It involved loudspeakers, not to amplify or reinforce acoustic sound, but to create an electroacoustic space in the room, superimposed on the acoustic space of the performance. It was usually quite quiet, set to the level of acoustic voices and stage actions or just above, but it could get loud – far louder than theatre had ever been before. It tended to involve sound effects, musical sounds, and sounds of music, and it often used microphones, which enabled the sounds of words and voices, or their echoes and reverberations, to be used in counterpoint with the verbal text and voices themselves. It might operate in the way of filmic underscoring, or perhaps in ways that played theatrical games: subverting conventional sign-systems, teasing the boundaries between the diegetic and extra-diegetic and reorienting the usual conventions of where sounds and music should seem to come from (auditorium, curtain or proscenium, stage and beyond). It played with scale, in filmic ways. In ways that were reminiscent of late melodrama, it could make characters' inner worlds and psychological delusions audible to the audience. It was the kind of sound design that, Sellars proposed in his foreword, 'spoke

to theatre as ontology' (*ibid*, vii). But is this not what music has always done? Spoken to drama as its metaphysical schematic?

In the end the proposed renaming was not instituted at that time. The distinctions, as far as dramatic theatre is concerned, between music and sound and between composer and designer remain confused. Roles and nomenclature still vary internationally. The taxonomic greyness of this area has been a source of frustration to professionals, educators, and students. However, my perspective here is that this lack of a disciplinary orthodoxy and definition is a matter to celebrate rather than complain about. Because to grapple with these distinctions: of music versus sound, of composition versus design, and so forth, and to try to explain how the auditory experience of watching drama today relates to the traditional delineations of music and of theatre, is to embark on a journey that takes one to the heart of both subjects. For the several books and articles that have now been written on these subjects, nothing is so valuable for the practitioner or the scholar, as to have to make and defend one's own arguments, be it at a conference, in an edited volume or at the pub: as to why theatre is music, music is theatre, and theatre music, as a dialectic between these terms is more than their sum. The aurality of theatre/the theatre of aurality, in which music and logos do battle with noise and chaos six nights a week plus matinees, and in which resonance rather than reason wins out. Music and theatre are big terms. They are freighted with metaphor. It is not hard to see why a discussion of their relationship might lead one to ontology, but the full potency of theatre music is also in its stealth. The greatest trick the theatre ever pulled (to paraphrase *The Usual Suspects*' paraphrasing of Charles Baudelaire) was convincing the world it was a spectacle, something you went to watch – that the Ancient Greek *theatron* was a place for seeing when first and foremost it was an auditorium, a hearing apparatus.

Theatre's music envelopes unsuspecting spectators who are preoccupied with watching actions and listening to words. It surrounds them in a musical metatext that operates on them slyly, through physical and subconscious resonance – and it is ever-present. The silencing of the melo in modernist literary drama was a musical negative, and in any case, even in the absence of musical sounds – even in the absence of words – the ear hears patterns in the creaking of the stage, in the stifled coughing of the audience and in the sirens leaking in from the street. Because music is a yearning. The ear hears two noises and will listen for rhythmic continuation. It hears two tones and listens for a third to establish the musical key. The ear is always searching for a bigger music. It peruses the arc of the drama for recurring themes, repetitions, rhythm, rhymes, and resonances. It hears small diegetic details and cannot help but look for an extra-diegetic big picture. If there is a jukebox on the stage, a ringtone, a siren, or a character whistling a fragment of a tune, then there is the hope they will form a larger musical scheme, that there will be harmony, meaning, and order in the end. And it is the hope that gets you, and which keeps you gripped. So we must continue to yearn, and we should

continue to struggle with definitions and nomenclature and all of the metaphor music and theatre come laden with in all their guises and terminological uses. And we must smile knowingly when people describe theatre as a visual art, because they have merely fallen for theatre's ruse. But if the simple question of 'what is theatre music' ever comes to feel too obvious to require books to be written about it, then we should worry, because we will have arrived at a place where we do not understand it at all.

Ross Brown
London, March 2024

Notes

1 The Listserv closed in 2008 but migrated to a different platform and can be visited here https://groups.google.com/g/theatre-sound-list. Its archive is a vast research resource for any historian of the subject.
2 The original convenor Jim Bay has let me search his personal records, but I could not find it. Alas the archive is not publicly available or well archived.

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Kaye, Deena and LeBrecht, James (1992). *Sound and Music for the Theatre*, New York: Back Stage Books.

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Tamara Yasmin Quick and David Roesner

Introduction

Tamara Yasmin Quick and David Roesner

A sole mournful oboe from a balcony on stage, a seat-shaking bass rumbling through a set of powerful subwoofers, a whimsical song by a trickster character, a symphonic score full of leitmotifs, a clownesque pots-and-pans-drum-kit in a show for children, a well-known pop song as a 'needle-drop' quotation – the list of musical and sonic events that form part of a theatre production's auditory stage is endless, remarkably varied, and often not easy to describe, interpret, or analyse. This book offers eighteen attempts to do so despite the challenges that 'theatre music' – let us use it as an umbrella term for the moment – poses.

In this introduction, we will present the aims of the book, its structure, thematic throughlines, and core concepts. Rather than offering a conclusive definition of 'theatre music', this volume treats it more like a 'travelling concept' (Bal 2002). Mieke Bal suggested this term in 2002 claiming that

> the counterpart of any given concept is the cultural text or work or 'thing' that constitutes the object of analysis. No concept is meaningful for cultural analysis unless it helps us to understand the object better on its – the object's – own terms.
>
> (Bal 2002, 8)

We treat 'theatre music' as an 'elastic' rather than rigid term – Bal's metaphor 'suggests both an unbreakable stability and a near-unlimited extendibility' (2002, 14). This is useful, since theatre music is inevitably a transdisciplinary concept unsuited to be a fixed object of study nor lending itself to a single methodology.

By observing, reflecting, and comparing various cultural and artistic practices of theatre music, as a group of authors with ties to Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland, and Turkey, we have learned to appreciate and celebrate the diversity of what contemporary theatre music can be like, what links can be found, and webs can be woven with concern to historical references and

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lines of development, as well as theatre musical practices across genres and artforms. By including cross-genre practices and aesthetics, we seek to mirror a plurality that is, according to Bal, inherent in cultures: 'it would be presumptuous to pronounce on what "culture" is, except perhaps to say that it can only be envisioned in a plural, changing, and mobile existence'.

This volume thus does not intend to be a 'handbook' on theatre music[1] but functions as a multifocal lens offering multiple different perspectives through which European theatre music today can be described and analysed.

The need for such a research volume on European theatre music is almost self-evident. Musical and sonic practices have been an integral part of theatre ever since the art form first existed 2500 years ago: not just in subsequent genres that are explicitly characterised, defined, and driven by their music, such as opera, operetta, ballet, or musical theatre, but in all kinds of theatrical forms and conventions from Greek tragedy to medieval passion plays, from Elizabethan drama to Restoration comedy, from Ibsen to Brecht, to forms of devised, postdramatic, verbatim, and site-specific theatre. Music is everywhere in these theatre practices, dramaturgies, and performances. At the same time, there is not enough academic recognition of the role of theatre music and theatre sound, its aesthetics, creative processes, authorships, traditions, and innovations. With only a small shelf-load of publications on the subject matter, this volume therefore seeks to make a significant contribution to a much-needed discourse on theatre music.[2]

It hopes to do so while envisioning a wide notion of theatre music. As we have already suggested the term itself is a 'shapeshifter' that signifies different phenomena at different times: the book does not attempt to 'solve' this problem by offering a universal definition, but explores the highly contextual terminology itself as well as the ways in which different cultures at different times understand and use terms such as 'theatre music', 'incidental music', or 'stage music'. We should add that part of this wide notion (which embraces individual chapters with much more specific understandings of the subject) is the acknowledgement of a certain fluidity between 'theatre music' and 'theatre sound'. The book does neither suggest that the two terms are interchangeable, nor that they are clearly distinguishable. In some cases, theatre music may be part of an overall sound design, in others the two may amalgamate and become inseparable. At other times, we observe theatre music in a context without any sound design to speak of and vice versa. Both can be treated – in practice and in analysis – as discrete elements, but are usually enmeshed with each other and, importantly, with the many visual elements of the stage, so that an isolated attention on 'just the music' is neither possible nor productive.

Selection

Given its thematic breadth and the diverse range of authors' voices, backgrounds, and approaches, the book is curated using two necessary criteria of

selection in order to give it further coherence and offer the chance to sensibly compare theatre music practices across art forms, genres, borders, and times, ensuring a still focused scope and a selection of perspectives that seeks to avoid being too eclectic or disconnected. We have therefore made two conscious decisions: with regard to time, firstly, we concentrate mostly on contemporary practices, particularly from the 21st century. There are, however, a number of chapters, which deliberately extend this focus historically backwards, reflecting key developments in the past and their lasting impact (e.g. Kramer, Stadler, Schröder, Fischer, and Rost). These chapters are designed to offer background and inroads, illuminating contexts, and offer resonances for today's practices.

The second choice is geographical: to avoid a false universalism and a potentially superficial engagement with global theatre cultures, the book concentrates on theatre cultures and institutions from the geographical area of Europe (and its close neighbours) and its respective theatre cultures and institutions. This is meant to enable a meaningful comparative analysis within a confined context that, despite its diversity, shares certain structures, work processes, and aesthetic references points, both in its theatrical and musical languages. Conscious of its selective focus, the book will not imply that its findings are valid beyond the chosen boundaries or for theatre music in general. Given the recent developments in European theatres, the book will, however, inevitably address how questions of post-migrant or post-colonial discourses have impacted on the narratives, performances styles, sonic ecologies, or 'listening positionalities'[3] within the European theatre landscapes.

One benefit of concentrating on Europe – despite the inevitable omissions this causes – is that it allows us to explore shared cultural histories and also some contrasts between current theatrical aesthetics between different cultures, languages, and institutional frameworks.

We were also mindful of the risk of discussing mainly mainstream experiences of mainstream artistic outputs: we are therefore delighted that our authors offered a range of more diverse experiences: from marginalised communities (Çelik, Verstraete), to inclusive experiences (Kapsali), from feminist and queer perspectives (Maierhofer-Lischka) to young audiences (Plank-Baldauf).

Aims

The book combines multitudinous aims. It seeks to deepen the existing research on theatre music (often in combination to theatre sound), particularly by viewing it as a practice rather than treating it as a distinct genre or artefact.[4] Thus, not only its function and 'Gestalt' in performances will be addressed, but its role in training and creation processes of theatre will be also included in selected analyses. The volume also embraces and discusses the ephemerality of theatre music. This is a departure from past practices by both artists and academics: some composers used to turn theatre music into concert pieces

and sheet music (see Kramer's chapter), and until recently musicologists have often abstracted theatre music from its fleeting performative context and thus reified it into compositions, to be analysed according to familiar methods. In contrast, this volume is interested in how theatre music is defined by its relation to the theatrical event, its actors and performers, its texts, direction, and scenography – it is in those relationships that its profile emerges, rather than being defined by a set of musical characteristics that would make it a 'genre'. Any music can *become* theatre music (see Roesner's chapter).

Furthermore, the book aims to offer a range of complementary perspectives on theatre music from dramatic and postdramatic theatre, dance, intermedial performance, and music theatre. Given the diversification of contemporary theatre forms and their generic fluidity, our understanding of 'theatre music' therefore oscillates between a wider and a narrower definition of the term (Roesner, Kramer): on the one hand, it addresses a more encompassing notion of compositional practices *across genres and institutions*; on the other, it serves as a more distinct descriptor of music in 'the performance of a spoken drama' (Savage 2001, 138) as *distinct from music theatre* per se. In order to achieve these aims, the book is curated with certain principles and structures in place.

Framing: Outer Structure

In *Part 1*, David Roesner and Ursula Kramer are setting the scene dialogically with a discussion on the terminology and ontology (or lack thereof) of theatre music (Roesner) and an historic perspective on theatre music as a laboratory of compositional innovation (Kramer). While Roesner attempts a definition of what theatre music can be, which terms are circulating in the academic research field of theatre music, how these are to be understood and classified, as well as which functions and which (relational) qualities today's theatre music can have, Kramer bridges the gap between historical 'Schauspielmusik' ('incidental music') and contemporary forms of theatre music by working out and analysing supratemporal commonalities that connect historical incidental music with today's theatre music referentially.

The chapters by Natalie Stadler, Duygu Çelik, Deniz Başar, and Anna R. Burzyńska in *Part 2* deal with theatre music and musical heritages in transition by investigating theatrical and musical phenomena with a distinct base in the past. By using the term 'theatre music' to describe the musical development of the *Jedermann* production that takes place every summer since 1920 at Salzburg Festival in Austria, the 'Kilam' in Kurdish theatre in Turkey, the 'Maqam Music' on contemporary Turkish stages, or the mixtapes by Jan Klata in Poland, which create a network of associations and references through music and music making, the chapters unpick the diverse and multilayered nature of theatre music – indeed a shapeshifter that changes its musical and its performative form as well as its function and narrativity dynamically.

The interplay between theatre music, its originally inherent performativity and its scenic integration into a *mise-en-scène* is focused in *Part 3* by Tamara

Quick, Konstantinos Thomaidis, and Margarethe Maierhofer-Lischka by shedding light on theatre music and/as performance with a special focus on musicking (Quick), voicing (Thomaidis), and foley-effects on stage (Maierhofer-Lischka). The dramaturgic usage of music making and sound creating as theatrical actions onstage lends a meta-level to the artistic practice and its narrativity. Form and content – the making and emerging of musicking and sounding – interact and are mutually dependent in performance.

Theatre music and/as experience is the focus of the chapters by Julia H. Schröder, Millie Taylor, Helena Langewitz, and Christiane Plank-Baldauf which form *Part 4*. Their considerations take into account a variety of theatre forms and audiences, including immersive musical conceptions in Ulrich Rasche and Monika Roscher's theatre productions, generated by volume, repetition, and tempo (Langewitz), sound experiences as a storytelling-device in theatre for young audiences (Plank-Baldauf), and the musical and sounding experiences that a recent production of Royal Shakespeare Company afforded (Taylor). The phenomenological perception of music and sound by the audience as a corporeal effect of becoming physically touched or even overwhelmed (Schröder) can be found in all of these case studies.

Part 5 widens the horizon by asking, how the term and concept of theatre music can be made fruitful between and beyond genres, such as opera or dance? What similarities and points of connection can be found? Christine Fischer, Maria Kapsali, and Pieter Verstraete analyse the outer limits of theatre music in a wider definition of the term in their case studies but at the same time provide additional theoretical considerations, which prove fundamental for exploring with music all theatrical and performative contexts. While there is an emphasis on studying theatre music in *dramatic* theatre in the book, we are also aware of the great generic fluidity between different performance contexts such as dramatic theatre, dance theatre, performance, devised theatre, music theatre, and scenic concerts today. It is often precisely through the inclusion and specific use of music that generic boundaries are pushed or dissolved.

For a praxeological perspective on theatre music the book closes in *Part 6* with two chapters located in the field of training, tracing possible ways of becoming a theatre musician (Moretti), as well as an academic framing of 'good' theatre sound by several handbooks, which also includes a historical perspective (Rost). They cast light on the role of education and some explicit and implicit maxims: how is theatre music taught? What are musicians' motivations and pathways towards an often-unsung career? What aesthetic, technological, and professional challenges and opportunities do they face?

Weaving: Inner Structure

Within this framing by an outer structure, the book furthermore establishes various 'warps and wefts' that connect the chapters and provide cohesion for the selection of topics and methods.

Obviously, the varying contextual understandings of what the layered term 'theatre music' offers are continuously explored throughout the book. This also offers insights into what, comparatively, some of the formative developments in its European history are (e.g. Kramer, Stadler, Thomaidis).

The chapters often present case studies which may be considered exceptional or unconventional rather than 'representative'. While there is certainly no such thing as 'typical' theatre music, there are certain techniques, functions, and aesthetic vocabularies that are customary in certain contexts and will reoccur in the practices and performances. By describing perceived deviations from 'standard practice', a sense of traditions and conventions still emerges, almost like 'negative space' in a figure-ground reversal.

Further connective tissue of the book consists in the acknowledgement throughout, that studying theatre music requires us to rethink methodologies. Theatre music today, we argue, can hardly be studied appropriately by using a single method, such as, for example, examining its narrative functionality or conducting a purely musical analysis. As an aesthetic phenomenon, dramaturgical tool, and performative practice we collect chapters in this book that offer a plurality of methods as well as combinations of these – reflecting the multi- and interdisciplinary nature of theatre music making itself – to demonstrate and exemplify productive approaches to theatre music. Amongst these are ethnographic and empirical studies (Quick, Çelik, Moretti), archival and theatre historiographic approaches (Kramer, Stadler, Schröder, Fischer), discourse analyses (Schröder, Rost, Roesner), praxeological studies (Quick, Burzyńska, Thomaidis), interdisciplinary musicological analysis (Verstraete, Fischer, Langewitz, Maierhofer-Lischka), and textual and performance analyses (Başar, Çelik, Taylor, Thomaidis, Plank-Baldauf, Langewitz, Stadler, Kapsali). In addition, aspects from queer studies, postcolonialism, posthumanism, narrative theory, cognitive theory, and phenomenology can be found throughout the chapters.

Some of the recurring 'motifs' of the book include the question of musical/aural/sonic dramaturgy, music, and (designed) space, performativity of theatre music, music, and diegesis, modes of listening, atmosphere, emotion, aurality, memory, creative processes, and the materialities of music and sound.

By unfolding all these layers of theatre music, we do not attempt to offer a single ontology or a conclusive definition of the term, nor do we write a unifying aesthetic of theatre music as an art form. Rather, we expose the complexity of the term and the variety of its forms and functions and celebrate the richness of the topic.

Notes

1 There are already a number of these: Bruce (2016), Burris-Meyer and Mallory (1959), Finelli (1989), Kaye and LeBrecht (1992), Leonard (2001), and Walne (1990). See also Katharina Rost's chapter in this book for a critical evaluation of these handbooks.

2 For example, one might consult, from a more historical perspective, Collison (2008), Curtin (2014), Hambridge and Hicks (2018), Fiske (1973), Ovadija (2013), Price (1979), and Shirley (1963). More contemporary approaches include Bennett (2019), Brown (2010, 2020), Home-Cook (2015), Kendrick and Roesner (2011), Kendrick (2017), Radosavljević (2022), Roesner (2014), and Taylor (2018), although many of these have a stronger emphasis on 'sound' rather than 'music' (more on this blurry distinction below).
3 Robinson, Dylan (2020). *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, *Indigenous Americas*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 451.
4 The research project 'Theatermusik heute als kulturelle Praxis' ['Theatre Music Today as Cultural Practice'], funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) from 2018 to 2022 and conducted by David Roesner (PI) and Tamara Yasmin Quick at the Institute of Theatre Studies at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, laid the foundation to this approach.

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Part I

Setting the Scene

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1 What Is Theatre Music?

David Roesner

Theatre music is everywhere. In contrast to its ubiquity throughout history and across the globe, it has yet to attract a broader recognition among theatre scholars, critics, and audiences. While its related artists – composers, musicians, sound designers, but also directors and actors – have no trouble defining it for themselves, scholars seem to be less sure about what it is and how to call it – never mind how to analyse it (Quick 2023). This is arguably one of the reasons, why theatre music gets comparatively little academic attention. It is certainly not for lack of material that it gets scant mention – both historically and in contemporary theatre music plays an often vital part in almost all of European theatre since its inception.[1] When discussing the beginnings of opera, Carolyn Abbate therefore cautions: 'One could even turn the matter on its head and ask whether, worldwide, there were many theatrical genres before 1600 that did not feature music in some important way' (Abbate and Parker 2012, 39). And, for the sake of completeness, one should add that the same is also true for theatre genres *after* 1600.

Four main reasons seem to contribute, I would argue, to theatre music's relegation to the side lines of scholarship and criticism. Firstly, it is very hard to describe what theatre music actually *is*, as it does not really constitute a *genre* of music – as opposed, for example, to a classical period symphony.[2] Music history, however, is highly concerned with *genres* or *Gattungen*, compositional formula with relatively clearly determinable 'ingredients' and rules, the changes and challenges to which one can productively trace and describe. Theatre music does not fit into this system of classifications, as I will argue more extensively later.

Secondly, contemporary theatre music in particular does not even fall into categories of classical vs. popular, mainstream vs. experimental, instrumental vs. vocal, analogue vs. electronic music – it defies all of these labels, markets, and audiences – and leaves no distinct target audience in charge of its appreciation.

Thirdly, theatre music, as a practice, is also more ephemeral and less autonomous than most other forms of composed European music. Often only sketchy forms of notation exist, recordings are not properly archived, and performances change and adapt during the run of a show. Theatre music

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does not materialise enough in a form that could be considered a 'work' (see Altenburg and Jensen 1998).

This further contributes to the fourth reason, which is the persistent assumption that theatre music is somewhat inferior music as it is merely functional (Von Massow 1995; Hinton 1995). While in some areas of functional *visual* design, such as architecture, fashion, and stage design, purposefulness and usability seem not to have deterred researchers from engaging with these practices, it appears as if 'functional music' is featured rarely in syllabi and publications within more traditional musicology, but is instead addressed by music sociologists, film music studies, or, more recently, ludomusicologists.[3]

It is therefore noteworthy that in many of the articles[4] on theatre music that *do* exist, the same three examples get cited, even though they are rather untypical and non-representative: Beethoven's music for *Egmont* (1809–10), Mendelssohn's *Sommernachtstraum* (1826/42), and Grieg's *Peer Gynt* (1874–75). These are exceptions not least because they were composed by famous composers and thus had an unusual longevity in performance history. This was guaranteed additionally by them being adapted into concert versions, notated and preserved in traditional scores.

It is for these reasons that most writing on theatre music (not unlike writings on film music) focuses on what theatre music does, what its functions are. In this chapter, I will concentrate instead on what it is. Functionality is of course an important part of what defines theatre music, but it is reductive to limit the discussion of the aesthetics, presumed ontologies or epistemologies of theatre music to how it serves a play, a place, a mood, a character, or a dramaturgic arc.

Looking for definitions in various dictionaries of theatre or music, one encounters a noticeable lack of agreement. But even if one cannot paint a clear picture of 'theatre music', one can sketch its slightly fuzzy outlines. At the core, a few overlapping terms are mainly used in connection with what we would refer to as 'theatre music' today.[5] To begin with, theatre music and the German 'Bühnenmusik' which is sometimes used in anglophone literature as well, are terms with multiple meanings. Theatre music has a wide and a narrow definition: it can refer to 'any kind of music which can be heard in connection with the performance of work on stage' (Altenburg and Jensen 1998, 255), including music for opera, ballet, musical theatre, dramatic – or more generally: text-based – theatre.[6] In the latter case, it refers more specifically to 'all the music performed as part of the performance of a play' and has been called 'incidental music' (Savage 2001). Most recently, this needed further qualification, since many theatre performances today are no longer based on a play or 'spoken drama' (Savage 2001), but, for example, on a postdramatic piece of writing, an adaptation of a film or novel, or are the result of devising, collective authorship, or techniques of verbatim theatre.

Sometimes used as a synonym, Bühnenmusik[7] (or: stage music, musique de scène, musica di scena) in its wide definition also refers to this same range of practices, but has also been used more specifically in the context of opera

to refer to music played on stage, often as an integral part of the diegesis and the scenic action. Confusingly, this specific use, often in the form of songs, marches, dances, or lullabies, which are frequently already called for by the dramatic author, is called 'Inzidenzmusik' in German to distinguish it from other forms of theatre music, such as atmospheric music that we perceive as non-diegetic illustration, commentary, or contrast to the scene, and from what we might call 'framing music', such as overtures and entr'actes. Inzidenzmusik is therefore a special case of incidental music.

Bertolt Brecht, whose collaboration with composers such as Kurt Weill, Paul Dessau, and Hanns Eisler still has a significant influence on theatre music practices and aesthetics today, also called for Bühnenmusik frequently in his plays, emphasising in his writings that it should be rendered visible and conscious for the audience (Brecht 2001 [1957]). He endeavoured a specific effect of his Bühnenmusik, which he coined 'gestic music' ('gestische Musik', Brecht 2001 [1957]). Kenneth Fowler traces the varying statements Brecht makes in relation to gestus and points at some of the contradictions (Fowler 1991, 29). Simplified for the purpose of this overview, one could say, with reference to Brecht's *Kleines Organon* from 1948, that gestus combines gesture with attitude. Gestic music therefore is intended to 'withdraw from purely culinary ambitions and instead organise certain attitudes in the audience' (cited in Brauneck and Schneilin 1992, 898). Gestus can be a social attitude *in* music[8] and an attitude when performing music.[9]

In all of these variations on a set of terms which describe a variety of practices and associated debates on their nature and use, we find a set of underlying assumptions, which need unpicking.

What Theatre Music Is Not (Or: Not Only)

Functional

One of the first characteristics put forward in many textbook definitions of theatre music is its functionality.[10] Research thus far has often concentrated on what theatre music does in relation to the narrative, the plot, the characters, and the dramaturgy of a performance (or: a play) and also how it functions on a meta-level, for example, by framing and promoting the show or attuning the audience to the event as such.

This has led to intricate and often helpful taxonomies which offer a great deal of descriptive and analytical purchase and the terminology to make important distinctions. While the encyclopaedias usually list a selection of core functions, for example, the use of music as a signal for start and finish, a foreshadowing of the story, a reference to an extradiegetic reality, a creator of mood, an indicator for scenes of dreams or magic (Altenburg and Jensen 1998, 1037–1038), Dana Plüger has offered a much more nuanced attempt to summarise and integrate the wide range of existing theories from opera, film, and theatre studies (Pflüger 2017, 146–147). Her systematic table has several

levels: at first, she separates meta-functions, which are not specific to the work in question, from 'dramatic functions' specific to the work or performance.

Meta-functions can instead be specific to the style of a genre or a particular time, can operate intertextually or intratextually, have sensually persuasive effects, and follow economic considerations.

Dramatic functions, according to Pflüger, are either diegetic or extradiegetic.[11] In the latter case, music helps shaping the macro- or microstructures or relates to the content, for example, by steering our focus, or as comment, parody, paraphrase, extension, or contrast. Diegetic music again can have a range of functions, such as, firstly, communicating something we cannot experience auditively, such as climate, milieu, historic time, gesture, but also inner experiences from emotions, atmospheres, or the subconscious. Secondly, it can also translate audible sounds into music, imitating, for example, a car crash, a thunderstorm, or a crying child. And thirdly, there is what Pflüger calls 'drama-inherent music', which resonates with definitions of 'Bühnenmusik', or 'Inzidenzmusik', cited earlier. This is music that occurs in the diegesis and which we may hear identically to how we assume the characters perceive it, or in a somehow modified way, like when a character sings a song on stage, but is supported by an orchestra or playback, which is not presented as part of the diegesis.

What Pflüger's taxonomy, which is expressly designed for narrative, dramatic forms of (music) theatre[12] and integrates approaches and terminologies from theatre, film, and opera studies, demonstrates very clearly, is that theatre music is functional in a plethora of ways, which often overlap and co-exist. If we look beyond functionality and narrative theatre, we also need to go beyond such models, however useful the differentiations they offer have proven. Firstly, they are based on a chronological and additive logic, for which there are many exceptions: these taxonomies are built on the assumption that we have a fictional plot first, put into dramatic form, to which music is later added, serving certain functions. That does not account, however, for a scene in a devised theatre piece, for example, which three performers have developed from improvising to a piece of music, which they no longer use in the resulting performances. Here, the piece of music is the starting point, its functions concern the performers, but not the audience, and the performance may well neither be presented as a fictional, mimetic performance nor result in a fixed script that we could call 'dramatic'. Yet, it is clearly an example of theatre music practice.

Secondly, the recent developments in theatre that have been called postdramatic, devised, site-specific, applied, immersive, discursive, verbatim, documentary, or gig theatre all come with (or from) significantly transformed practices of making and using music, engaging with musicality (Roesner 2014) and focusing on sound. It becomes increasingly difficult if not impossible to fit them into grids of functions.

It is thus important to reiterate, that theatre music should not be *reduced* to its functionality – the repercussions of this prevailing attitude have been

too grave: from its marginalisation by academics and critics to widespread precarity with respect to the socio-economic situation of its artists in a wide range of theatre institutions in Europe (Roesner 2023).

Traditional understandings of theatre music as functional music – 'music, whose essential characteristic is that it is related to a specific function (task, service): music whose production or reproduction is understood and is to be understood essentially in intended dependence on a concrete purpose, in fulfilment of a task' (Eggebrecht 1973, 4) – have thus often been tendentious.[13] While I agree with Eggebrecht in that theatre music – if we intend to understand it as such – cannot be meaningfully detached from its context without changing (or: losing) its meanings and effects, the idea that its understanding can be limited to determining its function, effect, or 'concrete purpose' is flawed. Most theatre music, I would argue, combines a variety of intentions, creates multiple – and often quite personal – effects, and carries autonomous aesthetic qualities irreducible to either the intentions or the effects.[14]

A Genre

The second thing I would argue is that theatre music is not (or at least: no longer) a genre ('Gattung'). It has been characterised and categorised as such prominently, and I would suggest that this has not helped: musical genres are defined by sets of compositional conventions, a dialogue between audiences and musicians led by certain expectations,[15] and as a result as a group of works that communicates a sense of what does or does not belong to a given genre. It is, as Hermann Danuser (2016 [1995]) calls it, a 'klassifikatorische[r] Relationsbegriff' (a classificatory concept of relations). While genres are malleable and can change according to time or place or context, they are still considered ontologically: by pointing at tangible characteristics of a piece of music, we can make a claim (and a distinction) whether this is a lullaby, a rock ballad, a symphonic poem, or chiptune. All of these, however, could also become theatre music![16] And since any kind of music and sound can be used (or composed, improvised, or devised) as theatre music, it is impossible to determine its ontological characteristics or commonly shared expectations. While there are certainly some shared attributes one can sensibly describe for particular historic periods (as I will attempt in due course), theatre music today feeds off what one might call a musical 'multiverse', the parallel existence of many musical styles, networks, and audiences, making it impossible or at least potentially unproductive trying to rubric it as a genre. If anything, we could call it a 'hyper-genre' (analogous to how theatre has been called a 'hyper-medium' [Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006, 20]): it is a practice of music that can include and reflect all other genres of music. Given that theatre music is created and determined by its relation to a theatre text and/or performance and the processes of creating it for and within that relation, I would therefore prefer calling it a relational musical practice.[17] As such, its creators often choose to not have this kind of 'musicking' (Small 1998) culminate in a

final, fixed form ('a work'), but express it in a set of instructions and conventions (for musicians, digital work stations, or both) that are actualised and ephemerally presented for each performance, without presuming an idealised, 'true', or 'correct' version of the piece.

Just Music

The music in a theatrical production does not only lack a core of intrinsic, generic qualities; it also lacks clear confines: both externally and internally.

Within a production, the clear separation that we find, for example, in traditional film sound – dialogue, sound effects, music – with separate departments, production cycles, training backgrounds, and responsibilities (Hanson 2017) is often porous in theatre's sonicity.[18] To clearly identify what 'belongs' to the theatre music and what is part of acting, performing, sound design, or even audience noises is increasingly difficult (and perhaps also futile). If, for example, in a performance of *Cinderella*, the team decided to ask the actor to rhythmically swish her broomstick, to which a small band begins to play an accompaniment, to which the actor then sings a song, to which the audience is invited to sing along, to which another character speaks some lines, we cannot separate 'the music' from the scene and all its sonic layers. All the different elements are inseparably interwoven. If the composer showed us the score of what the band plays at that moment, we would still not look at the theatre music of that scene.

We can go further and say that the stage design, the costumes, the props may potentially all have acoustic properties that imprint themselves on the theatre music. Or the stage may be rigged electronically in such a way that on-stage sounds are amplified or movements captured to trigger sounds, modify musical effects, or adjust mixing settings. The stage is then an instrument playing a vital part in the musical gestalt of the show.

Theatre music is thus rarely 'just music'. 'The theatre' leaks into the music – and vice versa: the production of music, particularly when it is live and visible, as is often the case and has always been, also leaks into the theatrical performance, shaping the aesthetic, acting styles, and dramaturgies of time and space. We cannot sensibly disentangle the elements we may attribute to 'theatre' and 'music' from each other in a show – a point I will come back to later.[19]

The *external* blurring consists of the fluidity between genres that is often caused precisely by the role that music plays in them. Trying to distinguish clearly and intrinsically between what we might call 'theatre *with* music'[20] from melodrama, singspiel, operà-comique, Tanztheater, or musical theatre will inevitably run into problems. The presence of music in all of these forms with no universal stylistic, quantitative, hierarchical, or other markers of distinction in place will often make genre allocation difficult and pass this task on to the makers or distributors, who will externally label their work for pragmatic reasons.

It is thus not just the *music* that eludes established musicological methods of categorisation due to its lack of autonomy and work-like nature as well as its low repertoire capability. Moreover, any presence of music in theatre, that is not clearly justified within traditions, conventions, and paratexts, may also contribute to a difficult (or fruitless) categorisation in terms of its respective genre.

Having outlined what I consider theatre music *not* to be from an academic perspective and what approaches I do *not* find promising,[21] I will now present three more constructive theses. I suggest that theatre music should be considered and understood contextually, heuristically, and relationally.

Context

Since any music can become theatre music, we need to look at *contexts* rather than certain genre criteria or a specific musical aesthetic to ensure a sensible discourse about it. Considering a song by Neil Young, played by him in one of his concerts, as theatre music makes little sense; addressing the same song performed by the ensemble of the Thalia Theatre Hamburg as part of their theatre show *The Night of Those Killed by Neil Young*,[22] as theatre music – rather than, for example, the concert of a tribute band – is almost self-evident. If we want to make a sensible distinction in today's theatre landscapes that does not use 'theatre music' as a historical umbrella term, we could argue:

1 Theatre music is, what theatre makers call theatre music (or whatever term they use to distinguish their music from that used in more established categories such as opera, music theatre, musical theatre, concert music, or new music). They may call it: background music, incidental music, underscore music, music for theatre. It is perhaps noteworthy, that to my knowledge and with some inevitable exceptions, there is a relatively clear divide nowadays between composing music theatre and composing theatre music, and that the respective artists tend to communicate their affiliations clearly.
2 A second context is connected to spaces and institutions: Theatre music is music which is performed in what venues, producers, funding bodies, conservatoires, or festivals have labelled 'theatre' or 'performance' rather than concert, installation, music theatre, etc.
3 Paratexts, labels, and institutional frames all contribute to the recipients' interpretation: Theatre music is therefore also, what audiences and critics have understood to be music to a theatrical event they did not classify as one of the above-mentioned, established music-led forms.
4 Finally, there is also a medial context: I would argue that theatre music that has been adapted for the concert stage (more a historic than a current phenomenon), that its creators have put on a CD, a MySpace page, on Spotify, SoundCloud, Vimeo, or YouTube is no longer theatre music. All these are documents *pertaining* to theatre music, but not the thing itself,