

## **Experimental Music in the Limelight An Outline by Reinhard Oehlschläger**

The concept of experimental musical theatre does not enjoy generally accepted esteem. Hans-Heinz Eggebrecht did not include it in the facts part of the *Neuer Riemann*, which is really teeming with the most far-fetched terms of medieval musical theory and rhetoric, just as he left out the concept of experimental music. It is the same with the *New Groves* by Stanley Sadie. The *New American Groves* based upon it, however, at least mentions experimental music, but does not describe in detail what is experimental about it. And the *Herder Lexicon of Music* by Marc Honegger and Günther Massenkeil, although primarily of French, which almost means non-experimental provenance, surprises the reader with contributions to both terms, without however determining their experimental aspects either.

As a rule music lexicons as well as lexicons in general considerably lag behind reality. Thus it comes as no surprise that experimental musical theatre can hardly be found in reference works, although it has a widely ramified history of several decades by now; on the other hand, reference works could be the subject of experimental musical theatre. And contrary to what music lexicons convey, there is the well-defined ideal type of the experimental musical play, a previous history, and a whole legion of the most varied consequences. Perhaps it would be best to start with the ideal type as such in outlining the phenomenon. Analogous to the description of experimental music, experimental musical theatre is a kind of theatre which is not predictable in its details even to the composer during composing, that is a sequence of audible and visible theatrical elements whose phases and objectives are not known to the causer already in advance. In fact the causer is eager to find arrangements opening up new constellations to him. This perspective of experimentalism in music has been deduced from Zen-Buddhist and old Chinese conceptions by John Cage. His method consisted (and consists) in organizing the sequence of a piece in a strict manner, the strictly applied determination of rules being a random operation.

The particulars of Cage's "Theatre Piece" of 1980 are determined in this way. The actions are laid down by means of figures and plus and minus signs on some sheet of paper. The piece is performed by one, two ... or eight performers, who may be instrumentalists, singers or dancers. "Each performer is who he is." This instruction is directly derived from the Zen-Buddhist conception that every man, every animal, every plant and every stone is a centre of its own. "There is no conductor or director. A rehearsal will have a purpose of removing physically dangerous obstacles that may arise due to the unpredictability involved." Of course something unpredictable cannot be conducted or directed by a conductor or a director. And rehearsals which were still dispensable in the case of purely instrumental pieces, such as the "Concert for Piano and Orchestra" of 1957/58, at the most becoming essential as individual rehearsals, are now indispensable to remove physically dangerous obstacles. (The rumour that the piece has never really been performed is not true: Cage created it for a special project of performance and also performed it with some of his friends, musicians and dancers of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. And Dieter Schnebel succeeded in staging an entrancingly present and lively performance with the working group "Die Maulwerker" on the occasion of the Cage performances at the Theater am Turm in Frankfurt in 1982.)

In fact John Cage's "Theatre Piece" is the key piece of experimental musical theatre only because it is called "Theatre Piece" (suggesting to the performers that they are performing a play). There are other pieces among Cage's own works that preceded it, such as "Water Walk" (1959), "Variations P" (1958), and "Music Walk" (1958), which are not less theatre-specific at all. The later versions of "Variations", "HPSCHD" (1967/68), and the "Songbooks" (1970) performed on a stage like the one of the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, are laid out differently with respect to the number and kind of performers as well as the materials, but are absolutely equal to the "Theatre Piece" as regards the basic experimental character. Even though the

ways of production of traditional operas were outwardly taken into account, this applies also to the "Européras 1 & 2" realized at the Frankfurt Opera House in 1987, in which the different levels of the double piece were determined totally independently by means of random operations with the exception of the assistants assigned to the singing performers: the assignment of performers, arias (from the traditional operatic literature), costumes, intermezzi, scenic props, stage settings, and instrumental fragments (from the traditional operatic literature). It did not take very long, until some ten years later the counter position in the conception of the experimental musical theatre was established. It replaces unpredictability by seemingly absolute predictability. Tom Johnson, who for some time had been a private student of Morton Feldman, one of the young composer friends Cage promoted, links up with the minimalists Steve Reich and Philip Glass with his predictable instrumental pieces, like the programmatically superscribed piano trio "Predictables" (1984), however, not to give himself up to the ritual frenzy of minimalistic movements and figures, but to sound the boundaries of predictability which can be found and made perceptible in a very special way. The attraction of "The Four Note Opera" (1972) and the "Five Shaggy-Dog Operas" (1978), in which for instance a lost thimble is systematically looked for in some orderly piled up boxes, lies in the absolute predictability of the sequence of sound and action together with the dry, in a way earnest comic, in watching and observing the singing performers carry out this mechanical task — of course with a wealth of surprising and unpredictable divergencies. The text sung verbalizes the concurrent stage actions in every detail, i.e. records them. It is just this parallelism that gives the pieces their peculiarly and absurdly tautological character. The tautological aspect of the "Riemannoper" consists in the fact that Johnson makes the four performers — soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, and baritone — sing texts about the operatic aria from the reference volume of the new "Riemann" in the form of arias, texts about the recitative in the form of recitatives, texts about opera acts, opera scenes, the ensemble, and the opera finale in the form of an act, a scene, an ensemble and a finale "out of the book".

As regards the music, Johnson assigns to these texts simple, nearly stereotyped scale and triad figures accompanied on the piano. The seemingly absolute determinability of Tom Johnson's music is even further developed in his performance piece "Nine Bells", in which nine bells of different sizes that are suspended from the ceiling are struck in various orderly ways by an athletic performer (according to performance aesthetics the most convincing performer being the composer himself), as well as in his purely numerically arranged instrumental and vocal pieces of numbers.

Almost all other more or less experimental conceptions of the musical theatre may be considered to come between Cage's absolutely undetermined position and Johnson's absolutely determined position. Thus some of the early musical plays by Mauricio Kagel, such as "Sur Scène", but also the more recent "Présentation", "Der Tribun", the song opera "Aus Deutschland" and the creation opera "Die Erschöpfung" are closer to Johnson's determined, in its effect partly absurd and surrealistic aesthetics, other works, such as "Antithèse", "Variationen" and "Contre-Danse" are closer to Cage's undetermined aesthetics in so far as they are based upon quasi-serial regulations which produce unpredictable results similar to the rules of random operations. But Kagel uses serial procedures only as regulations in order to eventually set up the sequence of a piece according to the basically baroque rules of the aesthetics of surprise. The borderline case of "Himmelsmechanik", in which there is practically nothing to hear, clearly shows this context: The images of celestial phenomena, of the sun, the moon and the stars, of lightning and sheet lightning are not used in an absurdly tautological manner, but as liberated from the rules of celestial mechanics, so to speak. A major difference between Kagel's aesthetics and the one of Cage and Johnson is Kagel's playing with the illusion of the theatre. While it is part of the prerequisite for the adequate reception of Cage's musical theatre (and music) to negate the illusionary character of art in the way the composer negates it, who makes no secret about the producibility and the specific

production of a work of art, and while Johnson always exactly tells the audience in the text of his pieces how they are made, even if they only consist of sounds, Kagel constantly plays with the expectations of his audience to fulfill them always only in part, but also to surprise them, to direct them to other paths, to provoke them, in this way finally confirming the traditional non-experimental illusionary aesthetics by variations.

Dieter Schnebel's "Körpersprache" is as silent as Kagel's "Himmelsmechanik", but much more directed, composing a sequence from embryonic to developed forms of human movements with the help of an ensemble of performers, thus being much more predictable. Luc Ferrari's tautological works of musical theatre on the other hand have been developed on the background of and by means of a radicalizing separation from the "musique concrète". Already the tape recording piece "Presque rien", an acoustic photograph of a summer morning at the seaside, is an aesthetic tautology. Other works are based upon transforming models and metaphors whose literality induces a tautologically absurd provocation, as for instance in "Si le piano est un corps de femme" and in "Matricia Persevers". In the first piece the female body is related to the instrumental "sound body" of the piano, in the latter the bodies of two persons are related to a system of keys and chords so that the union of two chords means the union of two limbs. (A quasi-synaesthetic system of simultaneous perception of chords and colours has been developed by Olivier Messiaen in his music as well as associated in his mystery play-like "Saint François d'Assise", without forcing this connection on the audience.) And Karlheinz Stockhausen, formerly a student of analysis with Messiaen, after attempting to find general melody characteristics for people known to him who were born under the same sign of the zodiac ("Tierkreis"), bases his work "Licht" upon eleven, twelve, and thirteen tone forms of melody and rhythm, which he considers superior, as basic elements for the father, mother and son figures. Stockhausen's gigantic work of musical theatre may be understood as a splendidly naive attempt to reconcile serial thinking with tautological conceptions. Consequently, individual scenes are designed as parallel sequences of instruments, voices, and gestures. Finally, at the border of absolute predictability, Hans Otte's later works of musical theatre can be found, which are more and more reduced to a single idea, such as "Déjà vu", "Showdown", and "Ich", which basically consists of the constant repetition of the word ICH, in some versions said by the author himself. The proximity to the fluxus aesthetics of La Monte Young and George Brecht is obvious in Otte's works.

Compared to this, the works of the minimalists Philip Glass, Meredith Monk and John Adams are relatively diversified despite all perpetual repetitions and thus less predictable. Glass's "Einstein on the Beach", "Satyagraha", and "Eckhnaton" are increasingly opera-like pieces on the basis of the pattern and minimum aesthetics, whose static character decreases at about the same extent as their statuary character increases. While Einstein's personality and works are almost inessential details which have to be put up with in "Einstein on the Beach", the opera "Eckhnaton" is a direct glorification of the divine right of Pharaoh Echnaton in ancient Egypt.

More than Glass, Meredith Monk started out from her own dance and performance experience. In "Education of a Girlchild", "Dolmen Music", "Quarry", and "Vessel" she presents the experiences of her own development and the tradition of experience in which she stands personally, from the synagogal singing of her grandfather's generation through persecution, emigration and immigration to the finding of the ego. Also her plays -realized with her group "The House" and partly at the Berliner Schaubuehne -comprise a high degree of notoriety and predictability, without any absurdly tautological tendency, however. Frequently it is as if - and in "as if" there is an elementary moment of the illusionary — as if she presented something extremely familiar to everybody in a totally new way.

In his so far only work of musical theatre, John Adams eventually uses in a thoroughly eclectic way the means of the traditional opera and minimal music to the same extent. "Nixon in China", based upon an idea of the director Peter Sellars, reconstructs the historic state visit

of the American president Nixon to Mao Tse-tung, like in the waxworks gallery. And the music provides the background, dramatizes and harmonizes, just as in Puccini's works. Adams succeeds at the first attempt in what the Italian Lorenzo Ferrero is dreaming of in "Marilyn", in formulating a new verism. (It would have been too simple indeed, if the Puccini of our days had again come from Italy.)

These examples certainly do not cover all the more or less experimental attempts at musical theatre. A special position for instance is taken by György Ligeti with his absurdly surrealistic "Aventures & Nouvelles Aventures", which in the meantime has become a classic of the musical theatre avantgarde, coming very close to Cage's absolutely random controlled aesthetics. From the other side Luigi Nono approaches Cage's position by consequently fragmenting material and context even where a mythologic subject is dealt with like in "Prometeo". The sensitivity of space carried to extremes noticeably brings Nono's musical theatre closer to the conceptions of sound installation. With his works "Antigone-Legende" and "The Persians" Frederic Rzewski presented two, in a way classical, political works of musical theatre, in which concretistic elements together with serial and improvisatory models fulfill unique dramaturgical functions. Walter Zimmermann was eventually more conceptual in his ontological works "Die Blinden" (after Maurice Maeterlinck) and "Über die Dörfer" (after Peter Handke). Sometimes persons are assigned to particular pitches, sometimes grid structures are used to produce complicated minimum-type sequences in order to achieve a detached tonality, largely independent of individual characteristics.

While the more recent traditional operatic theatre is of relatively expressionistic design as compared with all these approaches — the opera of expression corresponds to the music of expression — (just to mention a few examples of considerable differences: Hans Werner Henze's "Wir erreichen den Fluß", Aribert Reimann's "Lear" and "Troades", Wolfgang Rihm's "Lenz" and "Hamletmaschine", Udo Zimmermann's "Die weiße Rose", Siegfried Mattus's "Judith"), the radical musician of expression par excellence, Hans Joachim Hespos, is to be related more directly with the scenery beyond the traditional opera production. Hespos's musical language, derived from Anton Webern's early atonality, radically dispensing with all deformations, techniques of relief and regulation systems and building up sound patterns linking up from moment to moment by means of fantastic conceptions and associative connections, thus articulates every moment as *hic et nunc*. He is therefore most likely to be compared with Cage with respect to Cage's radical random scores. It was only relatively late that Hespos also presented works of musical theatre, for which, however, he mostly referred to fantastic themes, ideas and approaches of other authors as for instance to Aldous Huxley's "After Many a Summer" in "Itzo-Hux". In the less determined works pure expression is still more aspired to which stands only for itself and nothing else and sometimes culminates in a massive production of noise like in "Ara". (The TV production of the piece presented by the composer e.g. during the Darmstädter Ferienkurse 1988 produces a far more differentiated sound impression by directly applying the microphones to the metallic sound producing agents used, which was all the more so entirely covered for the audience by feeding in concentrated noise via groups of loudspeakers during the extensive final part at the Kammerspiele der Städtischen Bühnen Frankfurt.)

A certain critical anarchism in the musical theatre of Cage, Johnson, Nono, and Hespos is comparable, but of considerably different quality. Although Hespos bases his instrumental works on the technique of description of Webern and Gustav Mahler, he appears comparatively aggressive, pessimistic and black, Nono appears radical in a literary and philosophical way, Johnson ironically absurd in an oddly didactic manner, and Cage himself appears cheerfully anarchic, dissolving the optimism he displays.