



# *NEW MUSIC & THEATRE*

MATRIX [New Music Centre]

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**MATRIX**  
CENTRUM VOOR NIEUWE MUZIEK



# New Music and Theatre

We will begin with a prejudice: there is nowhere that new music seems as old as it does in music theatre. Centuries-old conventions in opera appear to be accepted as givens: the affect of sung drama, the mystery of the narrative and the mysticism of stage production. The “profane” or “popular” has lost nothing on the opera stage, except perhaps as an exalted form of staging. Grandeur is a fundamental priority, and is mainly guaranteed by means of a libretto of high literary quality: antique tragedies are invariably at the top of the pile, followed by perennially popular texts by authors such as Hölderlin, Kafka and Joyce. The more impenetrable the better. So much for the cliché.

It goes without saying – fortunately – that other concepts and results exist in contemporary music theatre. Based on a few selective examples, we will illustrate below the ways in which music theatre in the 21st century can work: freed from pretensions and pathos, with a strong concept and without the need to tackle the big issues. This article discusses work by Hannes Seidl and Daniel Kötter, Johannes Kreidler, Simon Steen-Andersen, Brigitta Muntendorf, Annelies Van Parys and Jennifer Walshe.

## Music theatre as a social phenomenon

Hannes Seidl and Daniel Kötter

Ingolf is welding. While he is at it, he talks about opera. Specifically, he talks about his personal, subjective ideal and over the artistic and institutional qualities of a form of music theatre he believes is successful. Ingolf – 72 years old, the former head of the sound archive at the Department of Musicology at Humboldt University in Berlin and a passionate electronics enthusiast – dreams up scenes, situations and a dramaturgy. The composer **Hannes Seidl** (\*1977) and filmmaker **Daniel Kötter** (\*1975) shadowed him with a microphone and camera, documenting twenty hours in Ingolf's life. This material was the starting point for the six-part music theatre cycle **Ingolf** (2016-2017), a Gesamtkunstwerk in various manifestations: a live concert with film, an installation, a workshop, interventions in the city and a concert with a live orchestra.

The result is anything but a literal fulfilment of Ingolf's ideas about music theatre. From the outset, the aesthetic ideas were too different for that. The result is more of an artistic approach to the social context. “My interest in music is equal to my interest in social issues”, says Hannes Seidl: “Social

issues produce sound, in the artistic sense or as a side effect. Social situations give rise to structures, connections between unforeseen circumstances and patterns of expectation. These structures can be converted into a musical experience." For this type of musical adaptation, an aesthetic context is required that has little to do with what is usually understood by the art of composition. For Seidl, however, it is logical to question what is "rooted" and even absolutely necessary to systematically call the building blocks of music into question: the instruments and their arrangement, the conventions regarding musical notation and media, performance and presentation practices, locations, spaces and costumes, strategic motives. Anything that cannot be put to the test is invalid, as far as Seidl is concerned.

In the music theatre trilogy **Ökonomien des Handelns**, Hannes Seidl and Daniel Kötter aim to investigate the foundations of socioeconomic activity. The trilogy saw the light of day between 2013 and 2016, and consists of three full-length parts, appropriately entitled **KREDIT, RECHT** and **LIEBE**. The three parts discuss the global dominance of the economic system and utopian thinking about normative structures, such as the close social relationship between trade and legislation. The trilogy does not really have a narrative, but it shows various situations in which people are 'trading'. You see (and hear) a banker at work, for example, the choir of the German Bundesbank, someone making a noise during a film showing, lawyers discussing global innovations, a barbecue, songs by Johnny Cash and a man stoically walking across a snowy landscape towards the North Pole as the dripping of melting ice is imitated by instruments.

KREDIT

RECHT

LIEBE

The borders between film and theatre, recordings and live performances, music and sound are blurred in *Ökonomien des Handelns*, melting into each other as it were. This ambiguity is also intrinsic to the production process. The actor is not merely an interpreter and the musician does not simply provide a musical accompaniment to the scene, just as the composer is not limited to the score. On the contrary: the composer is part of the creation process in which the conventions and codes traditionally association with "composition" are overturned.

"Music", Hannes Seidl says, "provides answers about people. My interest in music is based on analysing people: them, myself and us, and making sound with the results, with the aim of understanding other people and myself, where we are and who we are."

## Music theatre as a concept

Johannes Kreidler

Towards the end of the 1960s, when minimal music, pop art and conceptual art emerged in galleries and museums, it became clearer and clearer that concepts such as individuality, meaning, craftsmanship, complexity, elevation and originality were outdated as trendsetting concepts in the visual arts. Instead of emphasising the autonomy of the artist, the artist is no longer merely presented as a "producer of objects". The artist focuses on situating his or her activities within the cultural, institutional and discursive context.

In 2013, the composer and media artist **Johannes Kreidler** (\*1980) wrote **Sätze über musikalische Konzeptkunst**. In analogy with the artist Sol LeWitt, who had initiated the conceptual turn in visual arts with his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, Kreidler criticises a parallel development in (new) music in this work. Kreidler shifts the artistic intention from the how of a work of art to the why of its aesthetic content – and goes in search of the meaning of the musical work of art, independently of an esoteric or inaccessible frame of reference.

Today the musical aesthetic apparatus embraces countless internet archives on which a wide range of expressions of musical culture are shared with huge groups of people. That makes Kreidler sure that "the instruments of the 21st century will be characterised not so much by an oboe or viola as by the sound archive of the world wide web." With this idea at the back of his mind, he questions the nature of the musical work of art: "what is intrinsic to the work of art and what is not, what can be empirically perceived and what belongs to negation? What is semantic, what is a phenomenon? The artwork is a network. And what does identity mean today?"

We also find this theme in his work **Fremdarbeit** (2009). Here he enquires about identity and collectivity, originality and copy in the context of distorted economic relationships in the circulation of capital and goods at global level. According to the explanation of his methods, Kreidler did research in low-wage countries and commissioned a Chinese composer and an Indian programmer to plagiarise his music; the production costs of this were far lower than the payment he received for his own commission. The copyright to the product is attributed to Kreidler himself: thus *Fremdarbeit* remains indisputably his own work. The actual sound content of the piece – the music legally acquired by Kreidler – is unspecific, however, and is therefore impenetrable without additional information.

A semantic level is added to the performance of *Fremdarbeit* by allowing a moderator to give an explanation at the beginning of the piece, explaining its content and meaning. By implementing a speech of this kind, Kreidler demonstrates his opposition to the maintained ideal that music and sound are to be approached as a pure, abstract phenomenon, whose "aura" is dented with every reference to anything outside the music. In the case of *Fremdarbeit*, the opposite applies: without the moderator's explanation, the work would be unrecognisable. This fact alone confirms that it is actually music theatre.

## Music theatre as a physical action

Simon Steen-Andersen

Composing music that aims to be nothing but music: what this absolutely does not mean is music that escapes to a reality that is entirely within itself. Instead it denotes music that is direct, with an almost tangible presence. That is the aesthetic idea that the Danish composer Simon Steen-Andersen has been pursuing since the 1990s. In the mid-2000s, he expressed his idea of music and corporeality again: "It is impossible for sound to exist without being performed and without the decisions that a composer makes during the composition process. These are the decisions that make 'sound' exist to begin with."

In the cycle ***Next to Beside Besides***, Steen-Andersen composes music based on movement. The score is a kind of choreography that results in sound. Thus he inverts the concept of 'action and reaction': the movement is no longer primarily a means of bringing forth sound, but instead the sound is the product of a movement. This concept is extremely typical of Steen-Andersen's compositional style. When a work is transcribed, it is usually done according to the transcription practice that has been customary since the Baroque. This preserves the identity and sound of a piece, and the notation is adapted to the instrument. Consequently, the movements change when the piece is performed. Steen-Andersen takes a different route: because sound is the result of a choreography for him, that sound is already a movement and it is that movement that must be preserved to preserve the identity of the work.

Steen-Andersen makes a transcription of this kind in *Next to Beside Besides*. The title of the cycle refers to the time when the work emerged: first came the sextet *Besides* in 2003. He transcribed the final movement of that piece for cello solo, and named it *Beside Besides*. Then a new series of works emerged in which the cellist's movements were transcribed for other instruments.

His three ***Studies for String Instrument*** (2007-2011) are also based on the same question: "the movement of the sound – or the sound of a movement?" Nowhere in the score is a pitch determined. Only the movements the musicians must make are notated. "In this way", Steen-Andersen says, "the relationship between the choreography and the musician is similar to the relationship between the sound of the piece and the instrument: it is a choreography or a kind of dance that accompanies itself."

Specifically, it works like this: a two-voiced construction gradually emerges in *Study #1*, in which the bowing and hand movements are indicated. Both hands constantly execute the same pattern of movements, but with a different fingering each time, which results in different sounds. In *Study #2*, the pitches played by the acoustic instruments are manipulated with the Whammy effect pedal. The range of the violin and cellos, which is normally limited to two octaves, is thus extended upwards by another two octaves. In the duet *Study #3*, the musician is confronted with a virtual image of him or herself. That is done by projecting the virtual copy onto the musician's own body during the performance. As the piece progresses, an interaction between synchronicity and deviation unfolds. Sometimes it seems as though the virtual duo is imitating the real musician in an amateurish fashion, and at other times both seem to be fully-fledged performers.



# Musical theatre as social interaction

Brigitta Muntendorf

**Brigitta Muntendorf (\*1982)** takes a critical, dynamic approach to music: with each piece, she asks herself anew how a musical work of art can have aesthetic foundations and what it can permit itself. Muntendorf's musical material can be wide-ranging: from language and emotions to images and gestures. Her pieces play with the idea of identity, seeking out ambiguous dimensions and calling into question things that are apparently taken for granted. In her first pieces, she reflects on the place and potential of the artistic medium of 'music' in the context of today's technological world.

In 2013 she began the series **Public Privacy**. In this series, she explicitly tackles the conditions and guises that music assumes in the context of the internet. Live performers and "virtual" instruments engage in dialogue with each other and the traditional stage as we know it from concert halls is set against an additional playing area, the social media platform YouTube (one of the biggest and most influential video portals). The combination of these two opposites brings about a constant contradiction: presence and absence, reality and virtuality, "high" and "low", authentic and fake.

Thus *Public Privacy* seems to reflect on the voluntary revelation of the private and personal. The protagonists of the YouTube videos provide insight into their presentation and representation techniques, thus documenting the different possibilities available to the online alter ego, ranging from a shy presence to one that is almost narcissistically staged. However the voyeuristic nature of the viewer is presented with an unsolvable dilemma: is what we are seeing authentic, real, genuine? Brigitta Muntendorf leaves the apparent division between the "real" and the "virtual" stage open: probably nothing is what it seems.



In her opera **iScreen, YouScream** (2017) about social media, Muntendorf explores the interplay between presence and absence again, along with that between isolation and interaction. 10 musicians stand on stage in 10 black cubes. There is also an actress, likewise in a black box. Since the people on stage are enclosed, they interact with each other in apparently private spaces. They are filmed, however, with the result that the viewer can follow indirectly what is happening on stage. The players communicate with each other using monitors and a click track. "They are playing together", Muntendorf says, "but in isolation. If they want to communicate with each other, they will have to communicate with each other, and they will also communicate with each other. How? Indirectly. The way they always do. Using screens." In **iScreen, YouScream** the protagonists' interaction is staged. The ego is represented through visibility and audibility; for example, you hear status updates, a tutorial and a fashion haul video. Muntendorf lets the audience encounter social media behaviour, evoked by means of sounds originating in online forms of communication. "The viewer learns something more about how individuals isolated from each other construct a community using digital images with which they represent themselves online".

## Music theatre as an interrogation of the conscience

Annelies Van Parys

In a similar way to Brigitta Muntendorf, **Annelies Van Parys** also focuses on the interaction between social isolation, the representation of the ego and voyeurism in her chamber opera **Private View** (2015). Taking Alfred Hitchcock's thriller *Rear Window* (1954) as a starting point, the narrative plays out in a closed-off world, in this case a building in which several families live. The residents are entirely self-absorbed and do not even have any contact with their own neighbours. At a certain point a murder is committed, unleashing a general sense of fear. This fear is the moment that connects the residents, forming the starting point for Van Parys to get to work. She experiments with the ways in which fear is manifested: what is real and what is illusion? Who are the people being observed here? And how much truth is there in these experiences?

The roles of the four singers in *Private View* are limited to archetypes; they interact in the form of a metaphor for human relationships. Film material from Hitchcock's thriller is also added as a virtual element. This gives the overall piece an extra dimension, sowing confusion. Its meaning becomes more ambiguous: nothing is clearly true or untrue and everything is open to interpretation. Besides the figures on stage and in the projection, Annelies Van Parys points out that there is another character: the audience. The viewers become voyeurs, and that role turns them into accomplices. Thus *Private View* encourages reflection on the ethical responsibility of watching.



*Private view* (2015) by Muziektheater Transparant (c) Koen Broos

## Music theatre as a worldly experience

Jennifer Walshe

The Irish composer and performer **Jennifer Walshe** (\*1974) uses the internet as material to work with. Text, images and myths from social media – in the form of selfies, memes and conspiracy theories – feature in her work. The critical gaze she casts on the apparent autonomy of digital reality results in works of art referring explicitly to the here and now. In that sense Jennifer Walshe is an empiricist: she prefers observation, collection and analysis – in short, creation – to the application of learned techniques according to the usual standards.

To use an analogy from the world of film, Jennifer Walshe's work can be understood as "musique d'auteur". This also lends a more extensive meaning to the phenomenon of the composer/performer: in Walshe's work, this "personal union" has more meaning than simply a composer performing their own piece. "My role", Walshe says, "is different from what is usually understood by a composer/performer, such as Mozart or Liszt who toured the continent to play difficult pieces they had composed for their own superhuman talents. What interests me is that a person on stage has certain possibilities for performance that composers do not tend to make use of very often. In both theatre and dance, there is a long tradition of experimentation: different possible situations are tried out on stage, filmed, considered and then gradually developed. What interests me most is what such methods can mean for the process of musical development."

Walshe's performance ***The Total Mountain***, premiered in 2014, is a good example of contemporary musique d'auteur: "I want to write a piece", Walshe says, "with a texture that reflects our lives today. It was very important for me to reflect on myself and as such to see the process of writing this piece as an exercise. This reflection, thinking about the contemporary situation, means that I was 100% present in the moment. Among other things, I thought about what exactly it means to have a laptop in front of me. What am I supposed to do with the words and sentences that my laptop displays? How do they work? In what way are my existence and my being dependent on them?"

Jennifer Walshe emphasises this explicit reference to the now in *The Total Mountain* by installing the reality of social media as an extra "stage". Social media have virtual spaces in which identities and/or personalities emerge – the latter are designed, tweaked and become popular or, indeed, fade away. They are either successes or failures. In her performance, Jennifer Walshe reflects the way the subject moves within the virtual social network: "What I create on stage", she says, "is nothing other than what people experience every day on the internet. We are continually confronted with an enormous wave of information. Therefore my goal is not merely to isolate and show a single aspect of that; on the contrary, I attempt to move through all the impressions that the world offers me."

The term "syncretism" might be a possible description of Jennifer Walshe's work: different things come together, become intertwined and then form a new system, new references, interpretations, explanations and legends. The same thing can be seen in users of the Internet 2.0, in blogs and wikis, Twitter and Facebook accounts, and on online discussion and review forums. The difference lies in the distance at which Walshe constructs her aesthetic perspective: despite the worldly aspect, all her performances are music theatre and constitute living proof that this art form is anything but old-fashioned and anachronistic.

Michael Rebhahn

## COLOFON

The publication *New Music and Theatre* has been created in the context of the project *3 x nieuw*.

*3 x nieuw* stands for new music from the twenty-first century, new media and new audiences. The art music from the still young twenty-first century is often designed by a multidisciplinary character: stage direction, light design and scenography conquer the traditional stage and the understanding of the concept 'music theatre' gets a much wider definition than the classical opera. Technology is everywhere: computer programs, video and even social media are part of the artistic resources of composers.

In this hyperdiverse field MATRIX searches for starting points to get a larger audience acquainted with the music that is being written today. We selected four subjects, on which we focus on one by one for two years: new music and video, new music and interactivity, new music and theatre and the virtual concert hall. With customized guest readings and workshops in classrooms and the publication of additional and accessible background information, MATRIX wants to encourage young people and adults to get over their cold feet and wants to open ears and mind to the music of this century.

*3 x nieuw* is supported by [Cera](#).

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### Text

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**MATRIX [New Music Centre]** specializes in art music from after 1950. Being passionate collectors and researchers, we map out existing tendencies and reflect on the meaning of music as a contemporary form of art. Our library and documentation manages a large collection of scores, audio recordings and literature of and about new music. Being explorers and inventors, we are constantly scouting the great potential that contemporary music has to offer for music education. Music teachers, schools, musicians, concert and festival organizations and the public all rely on MATRIX in the quest for information and educational guidance. MATRIX wants to contribute to a cultural awareness that helps to overcome prejudices against the 'other' and reticence about the unknown.

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