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Singing Actors and Dancing Singers

Oscillations of genre, physical and vocal codes in two contemporary adaptations of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*

David Roesner

Abstract

By looking at two recent and widely recognized productions of Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (by choreographer Sasha Waltz, Berlin 2005, and theatre-director Sebastian Nübling, Basel 2006) this article discusses three main aspects:

1. Genre: Coming from a *Tanztheater* (Waltz) and a *Sprechtheater* (Nübling) background, both directors renegotiate conventions of the operatic genre, and consciously evade clear allocations in pursuit of a new and challenging experience for both the performers and their audience.
2. Physicality: Both productions place the performers' bodies at the forefront of the *mise en scène*'s attention – they re-map the singing, dancing, acting body by questioning conventions and expectations commonly found in the production and reception process.
3. Adaptation: Both productions take unconventional liberties by adapting in a domain, where notions of *Werktreue* (fidelity to the original work or score) still reigns. Adopting ideas from Nicholas Cook and Mikhail Bakhtin, I will argue that the conceptual, musical and theatrical implications of both productions indicate a re-negotiation of the social and performative relevance of operatic performance.

Keywords

Contemporary Music Theatre, Genre, Adaptation, Purcell, Performative Turn, Bakhtin

Introduction¹

With a little delay, it seems, the production and analysis of contemporary music theatre has seen a performative turn², not completely dissimilar to the paradigmatic shifts in the theatre since the 1960s, for which this term was coined.³ There is an increased interest in music-theatre as *performance* that replaces or at least complements the central interest in the score as the enduring and authoritative trace: a new focus on the ephemerality of the operatic event, the physicality of its performers, the “grain of the voice” (Barthes 1985) of the individual singer and the experience of the shared time and place.

Still, I would suggest that there is an underlying presumption shared by directors, conductors and audiences of music-theatre that operatic performances are (or are supposed to be) actualizations, reifications or even just illustrations of a prevailing work represented by the score.

A performative turn in music-theatre, I would argue, would not merely enhance the performativity in the *mise en scène* but would emancipate its performances from the predominance of the score. This would be in clear opposition to a traditional notion of the hierarchy of score and performance as expressed for example by Richard

¹ I would like to thank Graham Ley for his patient advice and meticulous corrections. All remaining flaws, however, are mine.

² See for example: Fischer-Lichte 1999, 2004.

³ Nicholas Cook elaborates: “In many ways musicology’s faltering advance towards a performance studies paradigm, most visible perhaps in opera studies (where the concept of the operatic ‘work’ has largely given way to that of the operatic event), replicates the breaking away of theatre studies from literary studies that took place during the last generation.” (Cook 2001: 6).

Taruskin in his general definition of musical performance in the old edition of the *New Grove Dictionary*:

Performance practice is concerned with the amount and kind of deviation from a precisely determined ideal tolerated [...] by composers. [...] Performers are *essentially* corrupters – deviants, in fact. (Quoted in Cook 2001: 2)

Similarly, Jonathan Dunsby points out in the new edition of the *New Grove* that “the ‘work’ of music has typically taken precedence over any of its ‘realizations’”. (Dunsby 2007: n.p.) But what if, as Christopher Small puts it, “performance does not exist in order to present musical works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform” (Small 1998: 8). What if music-theatre *performance* approaches the existing scores as material, like most theatre productions would treat the dramas and scripts they are based on, and engages with them by means of adaptation, confrontation, arrangement, re-organization, extension or editing. I would like to address these questions by looking at two exemplary productions of Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* from the past two years.

My thesis is that the paradigmatic shift from opera as work or *opus* to opera as performance is neither deviance nor corruption, but in fact a form of future-proofing music theatre for the 21st Century as it re-embeds it the social and aesthetic discourse of today without just redesigning its surface. This idea is partly indebted to Nicholas Cook’s thoughts on “Music and/as Performance” (Cook 2001) and partly to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories, to which I will come back towards the end of this article.

Cook proposes the following argument in favour of an understanding of scores as “‘scripts’ rather than ‘texts’” (Cook 2001: 1) and thus emphasizes the *processual nature* of musical performance:

The contemporary performance studies paradigm [...] stresses the extent to which signification is constructed through the very act of performance, and generally through acts of negotiation between performers, or between them and the

audience. In other words performative meaning is understood as subsisting in process and hence by definition irreducible to product. [...] To understand music as performance means to see it as an irreducibly social phenomenon. (Cook 2001: 6)

With reference to Lawrence Rosenwald, Cook further characterizes the identity of a musical work as “something existing in the relation between its notation and the field of its performances” (Rosenwald in: Cook 2001: 8), a field that Cook claims to be marked out by horizontally related instantiations rather than by vertical and hierarchical lineage. He argues, that such a notion of music as performance “rather than as the reproduction through performance of some kind of imaginary object” (Cook 2001: 8) does not serve to devalue works, but, on the contrary, to make them accessible to be *experienced* time and time again:

That music is a performing art is self-evident as soon as you say it; it is only the literary orientation of musicology that makes us need to say it in the first place. In such a context the fact that, as [Nick] Kaye constantly reiterates, performance tends to undermine the closure and quiddity of the textual object is hardly to be wondered at; what *is* to be wondered at is the way in which the real-time process of performance routinely leaves not a few, fragmentary memories (like a holiday, say) but rather the sense that we have experienced a piece after the sounds have died away. (Cook 2001: 8, original italics)

Sasha Waltz’ (Berlin 2005) and Sebastian Nübling’s (Basel 2006) adaptations of Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* aptly exemplify this paradigm. Both productions, albeit in different ways (as shall be demonstrated), open up the ‘textual object’, i.e. Purcell’s *Dido*, by re-embedding it self-reflexively in the contemporary discourse of operatic performance. They problematize issues of genre expectations, physical conventions and musical ‘faithfulness’. Both, I would argue, reflect on the opera’s central topos of cultural alterity between the Queen of Carthage and the Trojan Hero by means of creating *theatrical* alterity, or – more specifically – forms of alienation and de-familiarization, both undertaken with respect to genre, adaptation and body. I will aim

to look at these forms as performative strategies, which both practitioners employ distinctively and successfully.

Two ways of adopting adaptations⁴

Within the limits of this article, it will be impossible to do both productions justice in their own right. What I will try to do is to provide enough contextual information to enable the reader to place the aspects that I will try to extrapolate about both productions.

Sasha Waltz⁵, who is a renowned choreographer and director of dance theatre with her own internationally touring company⁶, is a novice to the genre of opera, as is Sebastian Nübling⁷, who is known for his energetic, rhythmically and physically charged directorial approaches to classics⁸ as well as contemporary drama⁹ and adaptations of films and novels¹⁰. Both have worked on *Dido* from the basis of their non-operatic skills and their individual directorial signatures; neither has used the opera as a mere pretext, but instead has exposed himself/herself fully to the formal, narrative and performative challenges of the piece.

Waltz has made some bold conceptual decisions to start off with: she has choreographed the entire opera, not just the dances. At first she seems to introduce two

⁴ I should add, that *Dido* lends itself particularly well to Waltz' and Nübling's adaptations; the fact that "no autograph score or contemporary printing of the music is known to survive" (Savage/Tilmouth 1976: 394) as well as the operas obvious incompleteness invite an approach that does not consider the score sacrosanct.

⁵ See: www.sashawaltz.com.

⁶ Sasha Waltz & Guests. See: www.sashawaltz.de.

⁷ See: www.goethe.de/kue/the/reg/reg/mr/nue/por/enindex.htm.

⁸ For example Marlowe's *Edward II* (Salzburg 2004), Schiller's *Don Karlos* (Munich 2004), Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (Hannover 2004).

⁹ For example Sarah Kane's *Crave* (Basel 2000), Joanna Laurens' *The Three Birds* (Hannover 2002) Simon Stephens' *Herons* (Stuttgart 2003).

¹⁰ For example Nanni Balestrini's *I Furiosi* (Stuttgart 2001) or Lukas Moodysson's *Fucking Åmål* (Basel 2005)

parallel artistic universes within the production by assigning a dancing ‘Doppelgänger’ to each of the main singing characters.¹¹ Subsequently, however, these universes merge in a texture of interwoven activities of dancing, singing and acting. Waltz and her musical director, Attilio Cremonesi, have also added a prologue to the opera based on the remaining libretto of Nahum Tate, and interspersing instrumental music by Purcell from a different provenance. In addition, most of the dancers spend the entire prologue in a huge aquarium-like pool, floating in full costume as if they were the Tritones and Nereides mentioned in Tate’s libretto (see figure 1). Judith Mackrell concedes in *The Guardian*:

It’s a beautiful, fantastical opening, with a convincing dramatic logic: Aeneas arrives by sea, an exotic stranger, and he will depart by sea at the end, leaving broken-hearted Dido to be consumed by fire. (Mackrell 2007: n.p.)

[Photo in original publication]

Figure 1: Swimming Dancers in Waltz/Cremonesi’s ‘new’ prologue. Photo: Sebastian Bolesch

Waltz and Cremonesi have further extended several numbers by a variety of means, including instrumental introductions, seemingly improvised *da capos*, a short spoken-word sequence on court etiquette, and a series of unaccompanied dance solos.

[Photo in original publication]

Figure 2: Double Dido: Sandra Hüller (front) and Ulrike Bartusch in Nübling’s banquet. Photo: Sebastian Hoppe

¹¹ Dido, who is sung by Aurore Ugolin, even has two dancing *Doppelgänger*, Valeria Apicella and Michal Mualem, perhaps because she is the most complex character of the opera.

Nübling on the other hand sets out with an equally strong conceptual premis. He and his dramaturg Julia Lochte blend Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* with Purcell's opera. They also double the main character, Dido, who is played by an actress (Sandra Hüller) and shadowed by an opera singer (Ulrike Bartusch, see figure 2). The entire drama is situated around a banquet or 'symposium' in the Platonic sense (see figures 3 and 4).

[Photos in original publication]

Figures 3/4: Nübling's *Dido* as a Platonic Symposium. Photos: Sebastian Hoppe/Muriel Gerstner

Watching from two sides of a long table, the audience witnesses the dramatic events unfolding alongside the preparation and consumption of a four-course dinner, the somnambulist events of the night and the sobering morning after. Actors and choir eat, talk and sing, accompanied both by a baroque ensemble, which is seated at one side of the stage as if hired for table music, and the computer-generated sounds of Lars Wittershagen's adaptations of Purcell's themes into ambient and sometimes exotically orientalized soundscapes.

Scrambling the Codes / Oscillations of Genre

Both productions, I would argue, gain interest and distinction through an intelligent and sensuous interplay between the central conflicts represented in the material at hand (libretto, music and drama) and the aesthetic language(s) they employ.

The mutual foreignness and concurrent attraction and intimacy between Dido and Aeneas and the battle between the cravings of the physical world and the metaphysically induced opposing fate are well represented in both productions as the

forces of attraction and rejection between the artistic languages, the physical codes and the associated genres that both embrace.

In Nübling's adaptation, for example, the mix of 'old' and 'new' music, serious and popular, real and virtual instruments is not toady popularism; it creates tensions and forms of alterity, that make our enjoyment of the multi-sensory symposium of smells, discourse, bodies, costumes, lights and music less complacent, because it confuses us and keeps us on our toes: The production plays with our notions of performative authenticity and musical expectation. Compared to Wittershagen's arrangements of Purcell's arias – sung by the actors with natural vocal colour and pop-music diction – the 'authentic' arias with baroque voice and ensemble seem to sound more foreign and artificial. The untrained singing of the actors creates more moments of heightened presence, authenticity and intimacy than the well-trained choir or the soprano of Ulrike Bartusch. Stefan Kister from the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* has put this paradox into the following observation:

The theatre musician Lars Wittershagen has alienated and re-arranged the score, has set the banal next to the sublime. Can one do that? Of course not. But the magic of Purcell's music has rarely unfolded more preciously than in this disfiguration. (Kister 2006: n.p., my translation)¹²

It is, as the cunning German phrase has it¹³, 'zur Kenntlichkeit entstellt', disfigured into recognisability; the magic of Purcell's music is at the same time lost and regained.

A second strong semantic link formed by both productions is to do with codes. Dido and Aeneas' struggle between the inner imperative of love and the outer imperative of

¹² "Der Theatermusiker Lars Wittershagen hat die Partitur verfremdet, arrangiert, Banales neben Erhabenes gestellt. Darf man das? Natürlich nicht. Aber kostbarer als in dieser Entstellung hat Purcells Musik ihren Zauber selten entfaltet." (Kister 2006: n.p.).

¹³ I was unable to trace the origin of this phrase, but found it to be a household expression in journals and newspapers whenever they comment on something satirical.

following one's fate and social determination finds its equivalent in both productions' playful clashes between theatrical and musical codes. Sasha Waltz diametrically opposes the fluidity of the swimming and flying body against the rigidly codified physical expression of court or classical ballet. Her choreography thus confronts love's liberation symbolized by dancers defying gravity and the prison of fate, with the literal and metaphorical corsets of the courtly imperatives of (physical) behaviour and costume.

By translating the metaphysical (love/fate) into the physical (body/movement), Waltz reintroduces the performing body into the somewhat limited physical tradition of operatic performance. For a long time, bodies on the operatic stage have seemingly been bound and immobilized by technical restrictions of and to the singing body. The genre expectation about the stiff operatic body is echoed in Waltz production in the etiquette and courtly formalisms, and contrasted with the immediacy and grace of bodies that move in three primary ways: there is the pre-reflective, quasi pre-nuptial flowing in the water tank, the earth-bound dancing, crawling and writhing, and the ethereal flying and hovering of dancers rigged into a kind of trapeze-seesaw (see figure 5).

Waltz is placing movement and dance in the three elements of water, earth and air¹⁴, and it is particularly the image of the two dancers on the trapeze that conjures up the notion of *Grazie* ('grace') developed by Heinrich von Kleist in his seminal essay "Über das Marionettentheater" (1995 [1810]) (On the Marionette Theatre¹⁵). Bernhard Greiner (2001) points out that Kleist's concept of grace – in the philosophical context of his time – suggests a unification beyond the linking of the sensual world and the

¹⁴ Fittingly, the performance ends with the last remaining performer lighting a series of small fires on the stage, which then terminate the performance by burning out.

¹⁵ All translations from Kleist's text are by Idris Parry (<http://southerncrossreview.org/9/kleist.htm>, accessed 25 April 2007).

rational usually associated with ‘grace’. He argues that Kleist imagines ‘grace’ as the combining force in the interplay of “sensual world and reason“ (“Sinnenwelt und Vernunft”, Greiner 2000: 201, my translation), since he paradoxically defines grace as a happy unification and oneness of the different in a space beyond difference¹⁶ (see Greiner 2000: 216). In this interpretation, grace is defined *ex negativo* and is an unreachable, utopian ideal.

Both productions of *Dido and Aeneas*, I would argue, implicitly work which similar ideas and ideals. They are inspired by the story itself, which seems to anticipate some of the artistic and philosophical debate in which Kleist holds such a central position: the other (Aeneas) – i.e. the guarantor of difference – enters the self-contained and pre-reflective world of Dido and disrupts her “state of innocence” (“Stand der Unschuld”¹⁷) (Kleist 1995 [1810]: 480).¹⁸ Their love-story is a doomed pursuit of the marriage of body and reason, individual will and fate, a striving for “a happy interplay of body or sensuality respectively and ‘soul’ or ideality respectively” (“ein geglücktes Zusammenspiel von Körper resp. Sinnlichkeit und ‘Seele’ resp. Idealität“, Greiner 2000: 201, my translation). This narrative and philosophical setting finds itself reflected in the *mise en scène* of both productions as the paradoxical attempt to marry the artistic languages of drama, dance and opera in a unity – I am inclined to say – of the different (materialities, codes, medialities, training backgrounds) in a place existing beyond difference where distinctions (for example between actors, singers and dancers, but also between genders¹⁹) dissolve.

¹⁶ “Grazie wird vorgestellt als Vereinigung, als geglücktes Einssein des Differenten, was besagt, sie vom Prinzip der Differenz her zu denken. Aber sie wird situiert in einem Raum jenseits der Differenz [...]” (Greiner 2000: 216).

¹⁷ I am using Idris Parry’s translation at <http://southernreview.org/9/kleist.htm>, n.p., accessed 25 April 2007

¹⁸ From the libretto: Belinda (Act I): “The Trojan guest / Into your tender thoughts has prest” (Tate 1689, n.p.). Dido (Act I): “Peace and I are strangers grown.” (Tate 1689, n.p.).

¹⁹ Both productions make ample use of cross-dressing and cross-gender casting.

The image of the two ‘flying’ dancers (see figure 5) represents this graceful balance of the dichotomous and is strongly reminiscent of the marionettes in Kleist’s essay. But it comes with a twist: the dancers *combine* the qualities that Kleist attributes to the inanimate puppets (antigravity, no conceit, naturally-caused complexity of movement) with those of the “Maschinist”, the puppeteer, whose mechanical impulse is needed to trigger the puppets’ movements, but who cannot impose on the movement’s grace, which is ruled by the laws of physics. Kleist’s puppets are entirely liberated from a conscience that would hinder their grace, while Waltz’ flying dancers are liberated from gravity and will as much as subjected to and conditioned by each other, as they are, in fact, puppet and puppeteer at the same time.

[Photo in original publication]

Figure 5: Waltz’ dancers airborne on a trapeze-seesaw. Photo: Sebastian Bolesch.

This liberation and restriction of the human body is a key theme in Sasha Waltz’ production and choreography. Waltz treats *Dido* as a piece about the loving and the codified body. In the final argument between the lovers, they are physically unable to come together, held back by gravity as well as their peers (see: figure 6).

[Photo in original publication]

Figure 6: Aeneas (Reuben Willcox and Virgis Puodziunas) and Dido (Valeria Apicella) striving towards each other

And in Dido’s lament she and her dancing double tangle themselves up in their own hair, enmesh themselves fatally in their own physicality, their hair already as long as if it had continued growing post mortem (see figure 7).

[Photo in original publication]

Figure 7: Valeria Apicella, dancing *When I am laid in Earth*, photo: Sebastian Bolesch

In Sebastian Nübling's *Dido*, on the other hand, different vocal and musical codes are juxtaposed but at the same time intertwined. The high tone of Marlowe's verse is contrasted to the sloppy mundane interjections that were improvised within the banquet situation, the computer-generated 'Bollywood'-Versions of Purcell's choirs compete with faithful musical execution along the lines of a 'historische Aufführungspraxis' (historically informed performance). Contemporary vocal techniques like pop-'riffing' ironically imitate baroque ornamentation and embellishment.

This mixing and scrambling of performative codes also results in an oscillation between perceptions of genre for both performers and audience. For the purpose of my argument, and acknowledging current theories of genre, it is important to dismiss the idea of genre as a mere criteria-based classification. According to Jim Samson, since the mid-1960s there has been a "shift in the understanding of genre from the classification of historically sedimented categories towards a more fluid, flexible concept concerned above all with function, with the rhetoric or 'discourse' of genre within artistic communication and reception" (Samson 2007, n.p.). Such a notion of genre characterizes a communicative convention, which embraces and balances the work (the individual production of *Dido and Aeneas*), its medium/media (acting, singing, dancing, design), as well as its recipients (the audiences in Berlin and Basel). Genre thus describes a communication that negotiates, for example, between certain expectations stimulated or triggered by a performance and an audience that is willing to confirm or dismiss its expectations, how to 'read' the communication.²⁰ Both

²⁰ Samson speaks of the "contract between author and reader" (Samson 2007, n.p.) or, in our case, practitioners and audience.

Nübling and Waltz create enjoyably equivocatory artistic communication in their productions.

Amy J. Devitt characterizes the communication initiated by genre further. She sees genre as a “dynamic pattering of human experience, as one of the concepts that enable us to construct our [...] world [...], as a dynamic and semiotic [I would add: performative, DR] construct” that helps to illustrate “how to unify form and content, place text within context, balance process and product, and acknowledge the role of both the individual and the social” (Devitt 1993: 573). It is a negotiation and thus, necessarily, a dialogic or even polylogic enterprise. Let me reiterate a few steps of this negotiation for both productions, with respect to genre, audience expectations and performance process.

Sasha Waltz starts her production with music by Purcell, but not with *Dido and Aeneas*. There are, as expected, dancers, both they do not dance, they swim. After Dido’s entrance there seems to be a clearer division of labour: the singers sing, the dancers dance; the audience can lean back a bit. A bit later a strange theatrical sequence disrupts our barely established frame: one of the dancers bullies his peers into the regimen of a curtsy, followed by a Dionysian rebellion that entails bizarre costumes and throwing of clothes. Now, it seems, the dresses are dancing.²¹ More and more the job descriptions blur: singers dance, or engage very physically with their surroundings like the half-naked, crawling spirits of the sorceress. I can imagine the

²¹ Christiane Voss elaborates: “The clothes that are whirled through the air transform themselves into a double: the are at the same time props and figurations of bounds and sound. For a limited period of time the clothes thus replace and double the dancers as well as the orchestra as they seem on the one hand to be incorporated in a choreography like the dancers and on the other hand seem to render time rhythmic through their sounds like the orchestra whereby they achieve a musical quality.” (Voss 2006, paragraph 9, my translation).

“Die durch die Luft wirbelnden Kleider transformieren sich dabei in ein Doppeltes: Sie sind zugleich Requisiten und Figurationen von Tanz und Klang. Damit ersetzen und verdoppeln sie für einen begrenzten Zeitraum sowohl die Tänzer als auch das Orchester, da die Kleidungsstücke nämlich einerseits, wie die Tänzer, in eine Choreographie eingebunden zu sein scheinen und zum anderen, wie das Orchester, durch ihre Geräusche die Zeit leise zu rhythmisieren beginnen, womit sie eine musikalische Qualität erhalten.“

effort it may have taken to negotiate with the performers to abandon their cherished preconceived job descriptions – at any rate, audience and performers are constantly on the move. And despite the abrupt swings in the course of this artistic negotiation, Waltz manages to unite the disparate elements without levelling their ‘difference’.

Two witnesses’ report:

A dancer begins, quasi suddenly, to sing. She turns out to be the soprano Deborah York in the part of Belinda and she amalgamates song and dance so organically and initially unnoticeably that for one moment one considers the combination of both in one person to be the most normal thing in the world of theatre. Even as this harmony turns into irritation and then amazement in the next instance, the dancing singer becomes the embodiment of the fundamental principle of this production: not to bring the different forces of theatre into a productive opposition, but to synthesize them. (Sollich 2006, paragraph 5, my translation)²²

An artistic project in which the dance takes on the responsibility to visualize what music, song and words express in the name of a holistic theatricality which re-designs the concept of performance itself. An agglutinated theatrical action, which surpasses the boundaries of the different genres and expressive codes, amalgamates the different levels of the performance [...]. (Gori 2006: n.p., my translation)²³

In Nübling’s production we can witness similar effects but based on a different starting-point: the audience of the black box theatre may have expected to see a play or an opera, or a mix of both, depending on what they made of the full title of the production: “Dido und Aeneas. Musikalisches Schauspielprojekt nach der Oper von Henry Purcell und Christopher Marlowes Tragödie *Dido, Königin von Karthago*”²⁴. Initially,

²² “Eine Tänzerin fängt gleichsam plötzlich an zu singen. Sie entpuppt sich als die Sopranistin Deborah York in der Rolle der Belinda und läßt Gesang und Tanz so organisch und zunächst unmerklich miteinander verschmelzen, daß man die Verbindung von beidem in einer Person für einen Moment für das Normalste von der Theaterwelt hält. Selbst wenn diese Harmonie im nächsten Augenblick in Irritation und dann in Staunen umschlägt, wird die tanzende Sängerin damit zur Verkörperung eines Grundprinzips dieser Inszenierung: nicht die Spannung zwischen den verschiedenen Kräften des Theaters produktiv gegeneinander in Stellung zu bringen, sondern sie in einer Synthese aufzuheben.“

²³ “Un progetto artistico in cui la danza si assume il compito di rendere visibile quello che musica, canto, parola, esprimono in nome di una teatralità olistica che ridisegna la concezione stessa dello spettacolo. Un'azione scenica ‘agglutinante’ che, superando le barriere di generi e codici espressivi differenti, fonde i diversi piani della rappresentazione e di cui non mancano esempi significativi.”

²⁴ Dido and Aeneas. Musical Drama Project based on the opera by Henry Purcell and Christopher Marlowe’s tragedy *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (my translation). ‘Musikalisch’ hints at the musicality of person or an event; ‘Schauspiel’ describes a theatrical event based on a play, and constitutes a section in

however, they witness nothing but a party in full preparation; the performers on the other hand, whether trained actors or singers, are primarily preparing food at that stage (see figure 8). Later, the actors sing, the singers act, and the performance alternately relies on heavily theatrical sequences and others in which the performance seems to hold its theatrical breath in favour of the music. Both Nübling and Waltz use a concept of genre that has the “capacity to accommodate the mixing or blending of genres, a device that might well confuse the classifier, but which greatly strengthens the communicative and programmatic potential of genre” (Samson 2007: n.p.).²⁵

[Photo in original publication]

Figure 8: Actors as cooks in Nübling’s *Dido*. Photo: Muriel Gerstner

What both productions amount to is a truly dialogic and polyphonic artistic experience in the Mikhail Bakhtinian sense: a piece of art that allows and facilitates a dialogue between the artistic languages it embraces, and a dialogue between stage and audience. Both productions employ staging techniques and devising processes that leave the characters ‘unfinalizable’, as Bakhtin would call it. The double casting of characters and the blending of performative vocal and physical codes and theatrical genres open up for the audience a wide(r) field for interpretation and aesthetic appreciation.

the German repertoire theatre system as opposed to opera, musical or ballet. The chosen title therefore already clearly hints at the impossibility of categorising the production.

²⁵ With respect to the discussion of genre, which Tereza Havelkova provides in her article “Between Opera and Film: Staging Encounters of Media and Genre” in this issue, it might be interesting to note her distinction of semantic and syntactic views of genre (based on the film scholar Rick Altman’s writings). I found this separation very enlightening in the context of her examples but have found that one would have to invent a third category to situate the particular discursive genre elements that Nübling and Waltz play with. The constructive confusion they create, does not register on the semantic level of genre (characters, attitudes, locations, etc.) nor on the syntactic level (dramaturgy, structure, plot turns, etc.) but what I am inclined to call the ‘meta level’ of genre: the expectations towards the performative nature and materiality in which a generic narrative unfolds or is presented.

What Bakhtin describes, with regard to the novel, as the “artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another“ (quoted in Cook 2001: 10) can easily be applied to both productions, and opens up a greater range of possibilities for contemporary music-theatre performance than the still widespread idea of the ‘realisation’ of an operatic work of art.

Waltz and Nübling do not invent, but instead rediscover and reinstate opera’s aesthetic and social potential for what Bakhtin calls ‘heteroglossia’, namely a coexistence of compositional unities, which permits

a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships [... ;] distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization [...]. (Bakhtin 1981: 263)

What this allows for – in stark contrast to the tendencies of the operatic genre to genius cult, hierarchical supremacy of the score, and certain self-indulgence – is an inclusion and presentation of different perspectives:

Languages of heteroglossia, like mirrors that face each other, each reflecting in its own way a piece, a tiny corner of the world, force us to guess at and grasp for a world behind their mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-leveled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or a single mirror²⁶. (Bakhtin quoted in Burton 1996: 39)

The audience members, guided, confused, and confronted with themselves by means of these mirrors, are invited by Waltz and Nübling to follow and assist both of their re-negotiations of music-theatre under new terms. It is proving to be an invitation that is not easily turned down. [4961 words]

²⁶ The mirror metaphor can also be found in Martin Vöhler’s observation on Waltz’ *Dido*: “Here an intensive permutation of the different means of expression comes about, something one could call an ‘amalgamation’: dance, music and drama mirror each other and open up whole wide space of reflection” (Vöhler 2006, paragraph 14, my translation). (“Hier entsteht eine intensive Durchdringung der verschiedenen Darstellungsebenen, die sich als ‘Verschmelzung’ bezeichnen läßt: Tanz, Musik und Schauspiel spiegeln einander und eröffnen einen weiten Reflexionsraum.”)

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Christine Birkle; Light: Thilo Reuther. Dido: Aurore Ugolin *Song* Valeria Apicella
Dance Michal Mualem *Dance*; Aeneas: Reuben Willcox *Song* Virgis Puodziunas
Dance; Belinda: Deborah York *Song* Sasa Queliz *Dance*; Second Woman: Céline
 Ricci *Song* Maria Marta Colusi *Dance*; Narrator: Charlotte Engelkes, Akademie
 für Alte Musik Berlin, Vocalconsort Berlin. Premiered on 29 January 2005, Staat-
 soper unter den Linden, Berlin. Recorded an broadcast by 3sat (TV director: Peter
 Schönhofer)

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