

Manifesto

"I don't mind if something's operatic as long it's not opera"

A CRITICAL PRACTICE FOR NEW MUSIC THEATRE

The work of Post-Operative Productions is centrally concerned with the problematics of opera. And as the name implies, the company recognises that opera today can only be "post-operatic".

We are concerned to develop a critical practice for opera that acknowledges the condition of the post-operatic.

the post -modern fallacy

By "critical" we acknowledge firstly the Kantian sense of "critique" - the method by which a discipline examines the grounds of its own possibility, as the great modernist art critic Clement Greenberg put it, "not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." Theodor Adorno framed this for music as a distinction between a critical and an avant-garde practice: "Music ought to be composed with a hammer, just as Nietzsche wanted to philosophise with a hammer; but that means testing the soundness of the structure, listening with a critical ear for hollow points, not smashing it in two and confusing the jagged remains with avant-garde art because of their similarity with bombed-out cities".

We have cited these two apologists for a high-modernism that stands firm against the blandishments of custom, popularity or outrage quite deliberately, because we want to indicate that our concept of a critical practice is embedded in the broader project of rational modernity. It is, as one of Adorno's heirs Jurgen Habermas once suggested in a highly influential essay entitled "Modernity: an incomplete project", a

project whose demystifying rigour needs to be kept in view amidst the often sloppy relativism and pluralism of postmodernity.

the operatic beyond drama

To argue that existing operatic practice is not self-critical may seem to be perverse. Opera is insistently, even narcissistically, self-reflexive. Just consider how many operas are actually about singers or musicians, or have narratives which figure some of the ways in which we describe the effects of music: narratives of seduction, enchantment, intoxication, infection... In this respect, if operas may be described as narratives about music, the history of opera must be told as a story about our culture's extremely ambivalent, not to say troubled, relationship to music. Yet we would argue that although this self-reflexivity is the symptom of an almost neurotic anxiety about the validity of opera as an art-form, self-reflexivity does not necessarily involve self-criticism. Indeed, insofar as the concept of a critical practice must be associated in the first instance with the modernist project, opera seems by its very nature as a mixed artform to place itself beyond the disciplinary reach of a modernist critique altogether: it is the artform that proves to us that the post-modern is often nothing more than an atavistic revival of the pre-modern in new guise. Apart from Brecht, who described opera as a "culinary" art form, and for whom the theme of *The Rise & Fall of the City of Mahagonny* was, as he put it "the cooking process itself", a genuine critical modernism has barely been broached within opera. Even composers whose *musical* language may be impeccably avant-garde invariably fall back upon a reified model of nineteenth-century dramaturgy, nineteenth-century models of plot, character, subjectivity, vocal expressivity, etc. These are models that themselves are questionable as a normative critical framework for opera, as Joseph Kerman unwittingly proved when he attempted to prescribe for opera a theory of drama extracted from Aristotle, with a good dollop of post-war American liberal humanism added, and ended up by excluding all but about eight operas from his canon of acceptable works. In placing itself under the tutelage of Greek tragedy at its birth opera sought to acquire legitimacy, but only succeeded in creating a paternal authority

against whose standards it could only ever fall short. The attributes of opera that Kerman dismisses as inessential, such as lyricism, ritual or spectacle, are amongst the attributes of opera that we want to identify under the concept of "the operatic": those attributes of tragedy and opera that Nietzsche typically preferred to the "bourgeois" dramatic values of individualised character, goal-oriented action, and "socratic" dialogue.

the expressive fallacy

But we would argue that even the more theatrically experimental opera and music-theatre composers of the post-war period have produced works whose idiom is still that of an essentially unreflective neo-expressionism, based upon the belief that dramatic authenticity can be attained through a heightened expressive intensity of music and action that is supposed to evade the constraints of "conventional" forms and meaning altogether (eg: Zimmerman, Penderecki, Ligeti, Bussotti, Maxwell Davies). But neo-expressionism falls victim to the fact that its gestures can only ever be the rhetorical signs of an unattainable authenticity, and to the self-defeating gambits of any practice that is based simply on outpacing or outflanking that which has gone before. More critically aware artists have therefore, it seems, preferred to side-step the issue of "opera" altogether, creating what are certainly viable forms of new music-theatre, but forms in which the "operatic" is conspicuous by its absence: John Cage, Mauricio Kagel, Steve Reich, Robert Ashley, Heiner Goebbels. We would include in this list the more deceptively conventional Judith Weir, whose preference is really for epic narrative rather than dramatic representation and expression.

ritsch kitsch

Brecht came to believe that opera was beyond redemption as an art form. If he was right - and surely he was - the question will be raised "why bother?" If opera is a redundant artform whose specific artistic properties have in effect been appropriated and superseded by the movie industry, as Adorno suggested many years ago, why

do we expend critical and artistic energy on tilting at broken windmills? For two reasons. Firstly, because, despite being moribund - or more accurately, precisely because it's moribund - opera continues to command a grotesquely inflated socio-economic position within our culture. This is because opera sits at the apex of a whole set of cultural values that are based upon the association of "high" art and class. Yet opera also offers itself as the most vulnerable point of that nexus; the point where the values of high art conventionally understood reveal themselves to be the closest to vacuity and kitsch. Opera and classical ballet have always served as preferred entertainment of the ruling-classes, mainly because they are the least intellectual and the most conspicuously expensive. Both opera and ballet teeter precariously on the brink of kitsch, but because they are kitsch they have accrued high cultural value. Wagner once commented on the Victorian bourgeoisie's smug love of oratorio, which permitted them to enjoy the profane pleasures of opera under the guise of religion. Since art has become the religion of the 20th and 21st century bourgeoisie, opera and ballet have come to serve the same function that oratorio once served, offering the pleasure of entertainment enhanced by the cultural capital bestowed by "high" art. The recent hysteria about dumbing down has surely been whipped up by the cultural elite in panicked response to the manifest evidence that "high" art is all too easily disneyfied.

the post-operatic undead

And if opera itself is redundant as a vital artform it nonetheless continues to haunt us as the post-operatic undead. Adorno once wrote that opera was an "eviscerated" art form that didn't know that it was dead. Post-Operative Productions seeks to anatomise the scattered entrails of opera, reading them as portents, signifiers of the "operatic" within contemporary culture. Post-Operative productions stretches opera on the dissecting table to refigure its parts, investigating critically what is at stake in the social and cultural investment in opera as an inherently anti-modern art-form born in one of the key moments of modernity, and in the survival of the "operatic" in postmodern culture as a figure for the contradictory values of the high and the kitsch,

the primal and the camp, the sublime and the grotesque, the pure and the hysterical....

the essentialist fallacy

In this we depart from the reductive essentialism that characterises the high modernist project: the belief that the integrity of artistic forms can be maintained by boiling or paring them down to some sort of pure point of origin and truth. This is the kind of project that, we would argue, informs the music-theatre works of artists like the Californian composer Harry Partch, Harrison Birtwistle, Philip Glass and Meredith Monk, all of whom have sought in one way or another to restore some sort of ur-operatic moment - whether that is located in mythic narrative structures, ritual forms, pre-linguistic vocality, etc. We reject the metaphysical search for origins and essences. We seek to offer not an ontology of opera, or even the transcendent grounds of its possibility in the Kantian sense (as it might be argued that Cage established in some of his works), but to ask "what do the forms and discourses of the operatic *mean* - how do they come to mean what they mean - who has invested in these meanings and why - what is at stake in these meanings ?" These are the questions that inform a "critical" practice. Ours is not, therefore, a plea for Reformation as a return to purity: an English National Opera-like attempt to supplant the decadent Catholicism of the Royal Opera - empty rituals and mystificatory mumbo-jumbo - with a properly Protestant devotion to the vernacular Word and more authentic dramatic Truth. Protestant Reformations profess to destroy false idols to reveal the one true God. We recognise that there is no God whilst acknowledging that the rituals of his worship remain potent.

In making new work we reject the kind of idealising practices that attempt to translate an idea that originates in the mind of the individual creator/artist into an ideal operatic form; that uses the medium and forms of opera to *illustrate* or *express* issues, themes, stories, as if media, forms and genres themselves were neutral or transparent (or as if the forms and media in which the stories were originally

presented – novels, plays – were themselves neutral or transparent). In this we are at one with the modernist project. But unlike high modernism, we start from the social and cultural situations in which music-making and performance arise, or from those cultural texts that have appropriated the operatic. We are not formalists. We seek to relocate "musicking" within those contexts - social, discursive - which endow music with meaning and value. We are interested in understanding how opera has figured the material and social practices of music-making - Wagner's definition of opera as "acts of music made visible" is still serviceable here - and how the gestures of opera have been appropriated more widely as the "operatic" in contemporary culture.

a deconstructive anatomy

Our project is also anti-idealist in that we acknowledge the concrete specifics of actual spaces and places, the particularities of the performers with whom we are working, the givens of found objects and texts, the conditions of a commission, the processes of production. We foreground the contingency of the performance event in place of the ideal aesthetic object. We reject the "sticky organicism" (Barthes) that underlies the conventional relationship of music and drama: the search for redemptive closure in formal unity and coherence that has dominated the discourse of academic criticism of opera. To this extent our practice is deconstructive, anatomising rather than suturing the disparate components of the operatic.

The following aspects of musicking and the operatic are subject to critical enquiry in our practice:

- **Music and Space.** Peter Brook was wrong. There is no such thing as an empty space. Spaces are always socially located as places, and places always have histories of power, authority and, of course, value.

Within places the configuration of space (the relation between audience and performer, between onstage/offstage space, between the performers themselves) is freighted with cultural meaning.

Mechanical reproduction has allowed music to be experienced in radically different contexts from those envisaged when it was written - how do the everyday contexts in which music is heard alter its meaning...etc ?

- **Music and the body:** how is "musicking" as an embodied mode of production located within other cultural narratives and images of the body ? How is musical production related to other cultural inscriptions of the body such as dance ? What role does desire play in how we watch as well as listen to musicking? How have the gestures of music been gendered, and how does the gender of performers, especially as inscribed within symbolic narratives, influence our experience of what we hear?
- **Music and visibility:** what is implied in the relationship or space between what we hear and what we see; how are seeing and hearing figured culturally ? (eg: Adorno's distinction between the rational/instrumental discourse of seeing as opposed to the regressive discourse of hearing).
- **Music and subjectivity:** how does music work to figure subjectivity and interiority? What is at stake ideologically in the privileging of subjectivity and interiority within modern drama and opera, and its maintenance within a cultural context in which identity is recognised to be constructed and fragmentary ? What is the relation of the subjectivity of the performer in relation to the subjectivity implied by the sung text ? How do music and drama work to construct forms of aesthetic subjectivity in the viewer/listener ?

- **Music and narrative:** within what cultural forms is music enlisted as an aid to narrative, and how does it serve to underscore those narratives ideologically? What narrative structures are naturalised within musical forms? How does opera authenticate its narrative devices, or handle the different registers of showing and telling?
- **Vocal and instrumental music:** what is implied when they are brought together; what does the physical/visual presence/absence of instrumentalists imply; what are the cultural connotations of the specific instruments employed? Is the instrumental accompaniment deployed as the inwardness of the singer, subtextual commentary, the composer's voice? What metaphysics of power and authority are entailed in these relationships? Are voice and orchestra figured as culture against nature, or as the material against the spiritual? What is the relationship between what Carolyn Abbate describes as the phenomenal and noumenal in music: that music that is heard by the character in the opera, or the performer, and that which is unheard?
- **Music and form:** how are musical and dramatic forms figured discursively within opera - what meanings do they carry? (eg, what ideological premises lie behind the operatic chorus - a typical representation of the age of nationalism and of mass production, consumption and politics? What role can there be for such representations after their appropriation by Fascism and Madam Mao? What ideological premises underlie the operatic form of the individual protagonist standing out against the anonymous operatic chorus?) What is at stake in the distinction between a reified academic "formalism" and those kinds of formal experimentation that work critically to challenge our everyday perception?
- **Music and technology:** how is technology figured: as nature or culture, the immediate or the mediated? How is the relationship between reproduced,

mediatized and live performance figured ? How are the networks of power and alienation that are implicated in all forms of technology recognised ?

- **Music and audience:** how does musical performance position itself in relation to its audiences: what modes of address are engaged; what kinds of participation are permitted? What social relations are endorsed or challenged by these interactions ?

- **Music and language:** how is the relationship between language and music figured: as reason vs unreason; as the social vs the personal ...etc; how is the relationship between the speaking voice and the singing voice figured: as the authentic vs the inauthentic, eg ?
 - We do not ask “do we like it?” but “what does it mean?”
 - We do not ask “what does it mean?” but “do we like what it means?”
 - We do not ask “do we like what it means?” but “what does it do?”
 - We do not ask “is this a good work of art?” but “as art, what is it good for?”

© Post-Operative Productions, Nick Till, Kandis Cook, 2002