From the Spirit of Music

Dramaturgy and Play in Contemporary German Theatre

David Roesner

Figure 1. Markus Meyer and Joachim Meyerhoff in The Imaginary Invalid*, directed by Herbert Fritsch, music by Ingo Günther. Burgtheater, Vienna, 2015. (Photo by Reinhard Werner)*

Prelude

In 1993 Christoph Marthaler devised and directed a production at the Volksbühne Berlin, which over time has proven to be a milestone in postwar German theatre.[1] *Murx den Europäer! Murx ihn! Murx ihn! Murx ihn! Murx ihn ab!* was as odd and long as its title, but also as musical.[2]

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2. *Murx den Europäer! Murx ihn! Murx ihn! Murx ihn! Murx ihn ab! Ein patriotischer Abend von Christoph Marthaler* [Kill the European! Kill him! Kill him! Kill him! Kill him! A patriotic evening by Christoph Marthaler]. Stage design: Anna Viebrock; dramaturgy: Matthias Lilienthal; music: Ruedi Häusermann, Jürg Kienberger, Christoph Marthaler. Premiere: 16 January 1993, Volksbühne am Rosa, Luxemburg Platz Berlin.

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stage performances primarily musically, which he has emphasized repeatedly, and the musicality of his productions is evident and entirely indisputable" (Hiß 1999:211).[3] There and then (and with countless later productions), Marthaler revolutionized the role of music and musical thinking for the German *Sprechtheater*[4] (spoken theatre) (see Aguet 2011; Barnett 2010; Dermutz 2000; Hiß 1999; Risi 2006; Roesner 2003).

Now, the next generation of directors and theatre composers and musicians are transforming this legacy.[5] For the past decade, theatre music has been one of the key drivers of theatrical invention, innovation, and style on German-speaking stages.[6] The impact of music, musicians, and musicality has articulated itself on several levels. Given the vastness of the system and the variety of German-language theatre productions, it is impossible in this article to be comprehensive. But through this selective survey, I hope to raise awareness of the often-ignored significance of music for contemporary theatre.

Breaking through the *Sparten* System

What once was rigid is now fluid with regard to genre and the role of artists and productions within the *Sparten* (divisions) system of subsidizing and marketing theatre, ballet, opera, musical, etc. With the addition of theatre music, performances often leave the seemingly clear confines of "dramatic theatre," straying into the territories of "concert," "dance," "music theatre," "sound installation," or "radio play." Yet the different Sparten coexist under one roof, staffed by separate personnel, usually with different training and professional backgrounds, aiming at distinct target audiences. Together, they shape one performance schedule for a single venue.

Historically, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries, theatre music has often been an afterthought, a late addition to a production, both chronologically and hierarchically. There are many exceptions to this rule, but by and large music was added to a relatively finished scenic product as an overture to set the tone (and quiet the audience), as an entr'acte to suture acts, or as atmospheric underscoring to heighten pivotal dramatic moments (Savage 2001; Taylor 2018).

David Roesner (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München) is Professor of Theatre and Music Theatre. He previously worked at the Universities of Hildesheim, Exeter, and Kent. In 2003 he published **Theatre as Music** *and won the Thurnau Award for Music Theatre Studies for "The Politics of the Polyphony of Performance" (2008). He has published widely on the musicality of theatre and the theatricality of music, including* **Theater als Musik** *(2003),* **Theatre Noise** *(coedited with Lynne Kendrick, 2011),* **Composed Theatre** *(coedited with Matthias Rebstock, 2012),* **Musicality in Theatre** *(2014), and* **Theatermusik** *(2019). He has led a DFG research project on contemporary theatre music (theatermus.hypotheses.org) and works as a theatre musician. http://mhn.academia.edu/DavidRoesner; d.roesner@lrz.uni-muenchen.de*

3. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.
4. The German term, which seeks to distinguish dramatic theatre from music theatre or dance, is old-fashioned at best, crediting "speaking" (Sprechen) as the defining and dominant feature. Increasingly, it has now been contextual rather than intrinsic criteria, i.e., institutions and PR, that have guided the attribution of productions to certain *Sparten* (divisions), the organizational units in many German theatres based on the conventionally distinguished art forms theatre, opera, and ballet. Theatres that have all three—including separate ensembles and leadership—are called *Dreispartenhäuser*. Theatre for Young Audiences is sometimes added as a fourth Sparte.
5. It should be noted that the interplay of music and theatre, its integration, interweaving, and confrontation, dates back a lot further than Marthaler, as Guido Hiß points out in his book *Synthetische Visionen: Theater als Gesamtkunstwerk von 1800 bis 2000* (2005). But as my research among current theatre musicians demonstrates, Marthaler remains an important touchstone (Roesner 2019).
6. In this article, I discuss Austria, Germany, and Switzerland as a unit. Particularly with regard to creative personnel, their large theatres draw from the same pool of artistic directors, directors, actors, scenographers, musicians, dramaturgs, etc., so a holistic view across borders is preferred.

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This has changed in a number of ways. Today it is very common for theatre musicians[7] to be part of the directorial team during the preparation phase of a new production, suggesting casting based on musical abilities, setting the tone for rehearsals by composing/finding musical "temp tracks" (provisional musical cues) in advance, and accompanying the development of scenes or extended improvisations musically, be it with an instrument or computer, using a plethora of sounds instantly available through vast sound libraries. These sounds can also be looped, combined, overlaid, or undergo other permutations, using real-time music editing software, such as the commonly used Ableton Live, originally designed for live DJ sets.

The music and sound design of a performance evoke historical, physical, atmospheric, or even abstract spaces, transforming our experience of a performance space, whether a theatre building or found space. Music also often transforms the performance style of a production, be it by expanding the role of live musicians onstage, e.g., by blurring the lines between acting, performing, and musicianship, or by suggesting a whole system of acting, an aesthetic or style that may become the recognizable "label" for a production or indeed the signature of a director and their team. As a result, theatre composers have now developed a rich portfolio of strategies of digital "musicking" (Small 1998:1) in relation to theatrical spaces, actors, atmospheres, and dramaturgies.[8]

Writing

Particularly in contemporary writing for German theatre, there is a cyclical relationship of mutual influence between music and text. The recent increased presence, inventiveness, and importance of music in relation to theatre has inspired writers to write "musically"; the forms of dramatic writing (also, forms of devising text, collage practices, or what Gerda Poschmann called "the no-longer dramatic theatre text" [1997]) are often guided by a strong sense of musicality. This in turn requires productions to do justice to these texts by translating them into proto-scores that include sounds, movements, lights, etc. In Germany it was predominantly the Austrian writers Thomas Bernhard in the 1970s and '80s and Elfriede Jelinek since the 1990s who paved the way for a kind of "musical" writing[9]—the former still within the confines of characters and plot, the latter increasingly abandoning dramatic conventions towards unattributed *Sprachflächen* (textual landscapes; Jürs-Munby 2009). Jelinek's writing—which she calls "a mixture between writing and composing, a way of dealing with language compositionally" (in Basting 1999:22)—has frequently provoked if not necessitated stagings that more often than not have made use of extensive musicalization: speaking as a chorus, rendering text rhythmically, structuring the flood of words into musical units, interspersing speech acts with singing and song structures, or technically modifying voice qualities. This was evident from Einar Schleef's seminal production of *Ein Sportstück* (Sport's Play; Burgtheater, Vienna, 1998) to many of the original productions directed by Nicolas Stemann, for most of which Thomas Kürstner and Sebastian Vogel provided live music.

Since about 2000, this kind of dialogue between a musicality of writing and musicality in staging has proliferated and diversified. Musical approaches to text include postdramatic writing that privileges musical structures or sound and rhythm of language over coherent narratives or

7. In German theatre, music and sounds are often provided by an artist who combines the work of composer, musician, arranger, editor, and sound designer. Given the reluctance by some of the people in the trade to refer to themselves as "composers" first and foremost, I will use the term "theatre musician" to cover all the activities (Roesner 2019:335–48).

8. The impact of music(king) on rehearsal practice has scarcely been explored to date. One recent publication, reflecting on rehearsal-creation practices, rarely mentions the role of music (Hochholdinger-Reiterer et al. 2015); an earlier, internationally oriented study acknowledges the role of music a bit more frequently (Harvie and Lavender 2010). More recently and with a more local focus, Millie Taylor has explored this question in great depth for the RSC (Taylor 2018).

9. In other countries, writers like Gertrude Stein, Jean Tardieu, Samuel Beckett, Caryl Churchill, Howard Barker, Sam Shepard, and Sarah Kane come to mind. For a more comprehensive discussion of the musicality of writing for the theatre, see Roesner (2014:121–70).

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psychological characters; investigating creative partnerships between individual directors and composers, musicians, or even bands; and evaluating the strong presence of music and musicians in the rehearsal rooms, which transforms received methods of rehearsal and traditional creative practices. These musical tacks have also been expanded to more canonical literature (for example, Michael Thalheimer's takes on Lessing and Shakespeare; Herbert Fritsch's *faible* for 19th-century farces by Labiche and Feydeau; and Ulrich Rasche's rhythmic renditions of Schiller, Büchner, and Greek tragedies) as well as the many adaptations of novels that have thrived on German stages since 2010 if not before (see Englhart 2013:119–21).

While "musical" writers have certainly contributed to and benefitted from a renewed interest in the musical form of theatre and a sense for the "sound" of performance (Kendrick and Roesner 2011), *directorial* signature styles have often been particularly influenced by continuous creative partnerships with individual musicians since at least 2000.

Creative Partnerships

In the early 20th century, theatres in Germany tended to employ a versatile (group of) musician(s) with ongoing contracts, who would provide most productions with voice arrangements for actors, piano accompaniment, incidental music as called for by the play or the director (a wedding march, a track to mask a scene change), or even just assistance in tracking down recordings that were deemed suitable as underscoring for a particular moment in the performance.

The arrival of the digital age and the possibilities it brought for music production and playback meant that musicians were more flexible to travel and carry their "means of production" with them: a laptop often replaced a complex system of things (instruments, recording equipment) and people (musicians, conductors, arrangers, recording engineers). It allowed musicians to follow their directors from city to city and to dedicate themselves more exclusively to one production at a time. Some of the formative voices of German theatre—if we take the annual jury selection of the Berliner Theatertreffen each May as an indicator—consist of directorial *teams*: a director who repeatedly works with the same stage and costume designers, the same dramaturg, and the same musician. Some of the direction/music pairings from the above selection of productions include Karin Beier and Jörg Gollasch, who have combined performers trained as actors and others trained as musicians almost indistinguishably in productions, blending what might traditionally be considered dramatic theatre, performance art, and concert. Lars Wittershagen has composed theatre music for many productions of Sebastian Nübling with melancholic electronic compositions, songs, or arrangements to provide a crucial tonal counterpoint to the unique energy of Nübling's raw and physical theatre. Nicolas Stemann's productions, which often seem to border on improvisation, cabaret, Happening, and even chaos, are held together with the live presence and captivating music by Thomas Kürstner and Sebastian Vogel. Michael Thalheimer's slick, condensed renditions of canonical dramas are driven forward by the almost continuous accompaniment by Bert Wrede—sparse tonal landscapes with a great dynamic range from the barely audible to the deafening. Kay Voges's stint as artistic director of Theater Dortmund (2010–2020) was characterized by a radical and thorough embrace of filmic aesthetics and digital media dispositifs, which led to productions like Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* in 2014,[10] for which T.D. Finck von Finckenstein (aka Tommy Finke)[11] provided the soundtracks, often using algorithms and MIDI[12] to make live theatre into an interface for electronic music and sounds.

10. See https://www.finck-von-finckenstein.com/tag/4-48-psychose/ for more information on this production.

11. T.D. Finck von Finckenstein is one of a few exceptions to the trend away from resident musical directors in theatre: for a significant part of the period of artistic leadership of the Schauspiel Dortmund by Kay Voges (2015–2020), who had a very clear mission to position his theatre as a hub of intermedial experiment and innovation, Finke was employed as musical director (*Musikalische Leitung*) of the theatre, working on many of the productions and helping to shape the signature style of the theatre.

12. MIDI is an acronym for Musical Instrument Digital Interface.

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Anyone familiar with the creative outputs of this (incomplete) list will notice that the directorial approaches and the resulting theatrical styles vary significantly and do not belong to a particular aesthetic. They have one thing in common: music is not an incidental addition to these productions, not a mere echo of a directorial voice, but a full-throated collaborator, an integral part of the conception, dramaturgy, and aesthetics.

On a personal level, this means that in many of the above-mentioned partnerships the clear distinction and separation of labor between director and musician dissolves. Particularly in cases where live music plays an important role, the musical director may at times take over as the director of a scene. Ingo Günther, for example, reports on his work with Herbert Fritsch: "We are a very well-oiled team, so that it is very much a collaboration. He is still the boss, of course, but on occasion he may leave the rehearsal, telling me: 'Ingo: you do it'" (in Roesner 2019:212).

Rehearsal Practices

Now more than ever, it is possible for a musician to contribute to rehearsals with complex offerings based on an increasingly widespread skillset of either improvising live on an instrument or using techniques of live composition, arranging, or editing digital sounds on a Digital Audio Workstation (DAW).[13] Even before the start of rehearsals, musicians are commonly involved in the conceptual phase of a production, contributing to decisions about whether or not to involve live music, weighing in on casting choices, and suggesting a particular audio setup as an essential aesthetic device.

In Andreas Kriegenburg's production of Kafka's *Der Prozess* (*The Trial*; Münchner Kammerspiele, 2008, sound design by Mathis Nitschke and Martin Sraier-Krügermann), the use of a single microphone connected to a loop machine stage left became a regular structural device, a moment of sonic improvisation and pure play in an otherwise meticulously rehearsed choric performance, which transported the protagonist's confusion into an overwhelming choric polyphony of actors' voices and sonic spaces.[14]

In Karin Beier's devised production *Demokratie in Abendstunden* (Democracy in the Evening; Schauspiel Köln, 2011, music by Jörg Gollasch), the decision to involve both actors and trained orchestra musicians as performers led to an overall metaphor of the concert rehearsal as a mirror of society. At the beginning of the performance, an actor (Michael Wittenborn) pretends to be an orchestra librarian setting up a rehearsal. The performance is then framed as a continuous effort by a conductor (played by Wolfgang Pregler) and his ensemble to rehearse and perform a piece. This effort is then structured musically as a continuous crescendo that builds to a chaotic and noisy climax.

In a very different context, at the Munich Youth Theatre Schauburg in 2015, two musicians (Taison Heiß and Greulix Schrank) based their adaptation of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* on what they call a Steam-Punk-U-Boot Orchestrion. The development of a "music-machine"[15] was the first step; all other decisions followed, including the choice of narrative, dramatic adaptation, stage and costume design, and direction.

Musical considerations, then, are often much more than mere amplifications of a director's vision; rather, the sonic, technical, and cultural implications of musical ideas and concepts can impact directly on aspects of performance, design, dramaturgy, rhythm, and physicality. Music

13. Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) refers to the individual setup of hardware, software, controllers, etc. that allows the musician to produce music.

14. All actors wore head mics and were amplified in different ways depending on where on the stage they were situated. For more details see Nitschke (2008).

15. The two musicians describe it as follows: "The so-called 'music-machine' developed from a laser harp, a magnetic-plunger-piano, a gyroscope-pump-glockenspiel, ballast tank drums, an orchestrophone, a linear-motor-air-organ, a Helmholtz-inductance-clapper, a light-ring-relay, tympany-pneumatic, force-field-vibraphone, energy-singing-bowl, and other crazy items and tools" (Heiß and Krohn 2015).

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now plays a decisive role in the creation of a performance. Most musicians working in German theatre today are present during most rehearsals. Sometimes they use the time the director and actors spend developing a scene to compose music using their portable studio equipment and headphones, relying on "osmosis" to pick up on the atmosphere and rhythms in the room. "It seems important," says musician Thomas Seher, "that the music develops not at home, but in the room where it happens" (in Roesner 2019:349).

Musicians also directly influence the energy in the room, the pace of a scene, and the drive of a character by contributing music and sounds to the processes of improvising or blocking, to finding the best delivery for a speech, the apposite rhythm for a dialogue, the right physicality for a performer. Ideally, says musician Nils Ostendorf, "I can act as a fellow player in the rehearsal room, changing the temperature of the space with sound and music and interact with the actors" (350). Actors in German theatres are much more acclimatized to a "noisy" rehearsal room, as Paul Clark comments on his experience of the differences with British theatre conventions (330).

To begin with, music can help set the tone of a rehearsal even before any concrete ideas are formed about how it might function for a particular scene or performer. Malte Beckenbach, who has worked with Falk Richter and Thomas Ostermeier, reports that he uses music to create a soundscape for the rehearsal room to help cover environmental noise and allow actors to immerse themselves and transcend the mundanity of the studio as workspace (61–62).

Even in rehearsals of established scenes, actors can be supported and "lifted" by music; they may use and incorporate music as a kind of "sonic subtext" into their development of a character. Quite often, this music—whether a found piece or a composed track—serves a purpose in rehearsal but will no longer be heard in the performance. Because it has found its way into the rhythm of a scene or the embodiment of a character, playing it in the show would be redundant. Most radically, this was the case in the production *The Re'Search* by Ryan Trecartin, directed by Felix Rothenhäußler for the Münchner Kammerspiele in 2016. Here, Matthias Krieg composed a lot of music, to which the three actors rehearsed: all of the music was cut just before the premiere as the team felt it was no longer necessary.

At other times, music will provide contrast with the text or devised scene and challenge the actors—a sparring partner of sorts, against which they will have to assert themselves. Matthias Krieg, who has worked extensively with director Felix Rothenhäußler, summarizes: "I try to support the actor and be a pleasure for them. But I have also to provoke them, so that we do unfamiliar things, engage in an interplay of provocation" (in Roesner 2019:202).

Space

Both theatre and music have an intimate—one might say essential—relationship with space. As Richard Schechner (1973), Gay McAuley (1999), and Gisela Nauck (1997), among others, have explored in great detail, space is a highly complex and multilayered phenomenon in theatrical and musical performance. Physical and imaginary spaces; visual and acoustic properties of buildings and locations; and modes of production, perception, and interpretation—all of which are conditioned by physical signs as well as atmosphere: they all play a formative role in performance. From as early as the Greek chorus, theatre has often interrelated acoustic and visual signs in pursuit of creating a sense of location, atmosphere, or dimension for its audience: the so-called *Wortkulisse* (verbal scenery) of Shakespeare plays; the use of music in Ödön von Horváth's plays, which makes you "shiver with *Gemütlichkeit*" (coziness);[16] the celestial music in Goethe's *Faust*—these exemplify how music has always been used to create or modify our sense of space in theatrical performance.

16. This is a paraphrase of an album title by the German cabaret singer Franz Josef Degenhardt *Da frierst du vor Gemütlichkeit* (1967); see www.cd-lexikon.de/album_franz-josef-degenhardt-da-frierst-du-vor-gemuetlichkeit.htm.

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A new and particularly important tendency in contemporary German theatre is the use of the now ubiquitous surround speaker system—although in theatre, unlike in realist film or theatre practices, it is not employed in pursuit of a *realist* paradigm. Many theatre musicians design their recorded tracks or live amplification for the acoustic and technical layout of the performance space. They no longer produce stereo mixes, not least because the media they use are no longer tapes, mini discs, or CDs, which store stereo tracks, but software such as Ableton Live, which logs individual tracks in arrangement windows, remaining flexible in many aspects. One can, for example, live-edit the sound properties of each track (equalizer, effects, etc.) and their sequencing, which means that a musical cue within a piece of music can now "wait" for an actor's line or gesture. Finally, one can continuously determine the spatial layout: each individual track can be allocated live to different speakers in the performance space, of which there are usually many, including several in the auditorium itself. Music in theatre more than ever can shape time and space. While in other theatre cultures this is often used to aid a sense of realism, German theatre productions use the spatial potential of music and sound design not unlike the way German scenographers use set design, which is to say, with a view to foregrounding the performative nature of space/place in Michel de Certeau's distinction (1984:117): exposing its material properties, its experiential qualities, its ephemerality.

Beckenbach's description of his work with Richter provides a good example:

> The conception of the space has a strong influence on which sounds I select, which set of instruments I use. It is a bit difficult to describe but has to do with aesthetics, also with texture, with material. The scenographer with whom Falk works, Katrin Hoffmann, often uses odd textures for her stages—just how I described my sounds: textures one can't clearly identify. And the perception of the sounds also changes and gets mixed up with looking at this stage. (in Roesner 2019:60)

Another musician, Matthias Krieg, deliberately sends the sounds he produces live onstage around the room using a mix of digital and analogue instruments; the sounds move like actors in the often sparsely decorated stages of Rothenhäußler's productions, confusing our sense of the relation of source and sound; playing with both acousmatic and nonacousmatic sound.

Bert Wrede, who works with Michael Thalheimer and Martin Kušej, refers to this practice in his own work, saying that music has the job of "keep[ing] the imaginary space 'theatre' running" (92). Made possible by digital technology and postnaturalist directing approaches, music and scenography join together to establish an imaginary space in which hearing and seeing often collide and contrast; in which theatre exposes itself as artifice.

As a second tendency, we find an exploration of the potential of music or sounds to reference specific or generic spaces that may be external to the given theatrical, scenic, or fictional world of the performance. Here, music acts as a textual reference, a cultural shorthand that relies on the shared knowledge of the audience and connects particular musical pieces, styles, or sounds with spaces, landscapes, geographies, etc. Quite often, however, these references are themselves transformed, becoming stylized or defamiliarized. They do not merely act as signposts, but as aesthetic objects or experiential entities in themselves.

Ingo Günther's use of three harpsichords (see fig. 1) in Herbert Fritsch's production of Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid* (Burgtheater, Vienna, 2015) is a good example of this latter tendency. Both as a prop (the only element on the otherwise empty stage) and as a musical instrument, the harpsichord conjures up a time (17th century); a geographical location (Western Europe, particularly Italy, Germany, England, and France); specific social classes and their dwellings (courtly society or bourgeois class aspirations; see Kottick 2003); and a range of musical styles and composers (late Renaissance and Baroque; Couperin, Scarlatti, Handel, Lully, Bach, et al.). Here, we already—unusually—have *three* of these instruments in otherwise colorfully abstract scenography. In addition, and even more perplexing, the harpsichords are played by machines like automated player pianos. Rigged with robotics and controlled by

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software, they are now instruments of the avantgarde, made for a sound installation rather than a baroque salon. And while the *sound* of the harpsichords may transport us to Molière's France, the frenetic cacophonic music *played* on them has very different resonances: perhaps Dada or Futurism, perhaps general instances of the dissonant art music of the 20th century. By feeding his computer baroque musical scores, which he then transforms significantly and plays back via the automated harpsichords, Günther arrives at a kind of "Lully on Speed,"[17] helping to establish the generally crazed atmosphere, overt theatricality, and anarchic feel of Fritsch's production.

One final aspect of the attention given to the musicality of space is the incorporation of offstage noise and the creation of onstage noise. While periods of German theatre history (particularly the late 19th and 20th centuries) were dominated by a paradigm of silence, which meant that sounds from outside and within the theatre building were deliberately excluded or muffled with the aim of privileging the spoken word onstage, productions today often embrace the noisiness of performance and create spaces rich in sonic textures and resonances. The use of liquids, for example, whether water or stage blood, which actors wade through, splash about in, pour over each other, slide on, are rained upon by, gurgle, splutter, swallow, or spit, does not only create visual spectacle and metaphor, but also a world, so to speak, of sound and water music.

Style

Hans-Thies Lehmann devotes only a few pages in his seminal *Postdramatisches Theater* (1999; 2006 in English as *Postdramatic Theatre*) to what he called *Musikalisierung* (musicalization) (1999:155–58). He observes the tendency of postdramatic theatre to render all of its components "musical," not just language, and to see and hear "theatre *as* music" (155).[18] Since then, both the notion that musical structures could serve as theatrical dramaturgy (be it in addition to or as a replacement for linear narratives and psychologies); and the development or rediscovery of hybrid performance styles that interweave acting, performing, and musicking have blossomed and diversified.[19]

The first of these two tendencies—musical dramaturgies for dramatic theatre—can manifest in the use of formal structures or even musical models and quasi-polyphonic arrangements of the literal and figurative "voices" at play in a theatrical performance. Performances may use recurrent motifs, and may rely on repetition, variation, or contrast along musical parameters such as rhythm, timbre, duration, density, or sparsity of (sonic) events, etc., to give a performance a musical rather than narrative coherence. Musician Lars Wittershagen, who works with Sebastian Nübling among others, reports that on occasion Nübling would turn to him in rehearsal and ask, "Do *you* know how this should end?"—indicating that his productions always include a *musical* logic in addition to a textual development of characters (see Roesner 2019:78). Nübling sometimes even adds an additional performer for his productions, a kind of "trickster," a mysterious figure, whose primary mode of expression is physical and musical rather than verbal.[20]

This brings us to the second tendency mentioned above: the hybridity of theatrical performance. Irrespective of whether one looks at productions of canonical texts, contemporary postdramatic writings, or devised theatre or performance, the stage is often populated by a mix of actors, dancers, musicians, and other types of performers, whose backgrounds and job descriptions bleed into each

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17. See and hear his comments on this blog entry from my DFG-project on contemporary practices of theatre music at https://theatermus.hypotheses.org/date/2019/11. See also my interview with Ingo Günther in Roesner (2019:204–22).

18. In my PhD dissertation from 2003, I sought to substantiate this idea much further, particularly by developing a methodology for the analysis of this kind of cross-media musicality (Roesner 2003).

19. One could argue, of course, that in both European and non-European theatre histories there are plenty of examples where acting, singing, musicking, and dancing are profoundly interwoven.

20. Risto Kübar's role in *Three Kingdoms* (2011) by Simon Stephens, a collaboration between NO99 Theatre, Estonia; Münchner Kammerspiele, Germany; and Lyric Hammersmith, UK, is a good example of this practice.

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Figure 2. Die Nibelungen—allerdings mit anderem Text und auch anderer Melodie *(The Nibelungen—but with a different text and also a different melody), directed by Barbara Bürk and Clemens Sienknecht, music by Clemens Sienknecht. Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg, 2019. (Photo by Mathias Horn)*

other.[21] Hajo Kurzenberger outlines this diversity and hybridity of tasks and styles in a cluster of terms: "From the portrayer of humans to the multifunctional player. The actor as role player, performer, self-exposer, entertainer, physical artist, camera object, musician, talking machine, chorister, field researcher, expert of the everyday"[22] (Kurzenberger 2011:76).

Both aspects combined characterize a range of directorial styles, even trademarks, that owe a great debt to the particular musical sensibilities at play in the productions. The perpetual kinetic meter of walking in Ulrich Rasche's productions, for example, is juxtaposed with choric speech-rhythms and the ebb and flow of minimal music by composers Ari Benjamin Meyers or Monika Roscher to create Rasche's signature aesthetic—at times praised as hypnotic and overwhelming; at others criticized as enervating, redundant, and macho.[23] In stark contrast, we have the highly popular, quirky, and retro-infused adaptations by Barbara Bürk and Clemens Sienknecht (who worked with Christoph Marthaler), who stage classic novels like *Effi Briest*, *Anna Karenina*, and sagas like *Die Nibelungen* (see fig. 2). They transport their iconic source texts into a 1970s radio studio *cum* living room creating a genre mix of literature recitation, audio book, radio play, and DJ set, using a highly eclectic mix of pop songs in weird and wonderful arrangements. Karin Beier and Jörg Gollasch, in yet another hallmark of music-theatrical style, combine and contrast the ideas of avantgarde composers Mauricio Kagel and John Cage on "instrumental theatre"; Beier and

21. See also Tamara Quick's essay "Die Qualität im Relationalen," in which she explores live musicianship on the theatre stage in more detail (Quick 2019).

22. This last coinage refers specifically to the practice of Rimini Protokoll (see Dreysse and Malzacher 2008).

23. See for example Ulrich Seidler's review of Rasche's 2020 production of Sarah Kane's *Psychosis 4.48* (Deutsches Theater, Berlin) or Egbert Tholl's review of Rasche's *Woyzeck* (Basel/Munich 2017/2020) also from 2020. A summary of the contrasting responses can be found on the German entry on Rasche on Wikipedia: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulrich_Rasche.

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Gollasch superimpose compositional techniques onto all elements onstage, drawing on the rhythms and harmonies of Kurt Weill, circus, and cabaret. The result is a theatre that is highly energetic, physical, and immediate as well as enigmatic, stylized, and artificial.

The inseparable interweaving of music and direction in contemporary German theatre thus manifests itself in a frequent abandonment of the clear distinctions between stage and orchestra pit, acting and making music, singing and speaking. It also redefines what an actor is. By way of example, Felix Knopp is a highly musical actor: he unleashed his inner guitar hero in Nicolas Stemann's *Die Räuber* (*The Robbers*; Thalia Theater, Hamburg 2008) and more recently in Nübling's *Die Nacht der von Neil Young Getöteten* (The Night of Those Killed by Neil Young; Thalia Theater, Hamburg 2019, see fig. 3). Jazz vocalist Jelena Kuljić became an ensemble member at the Münchner Kammerspiele in 2015 electrifying audiences as a singer, actor, and performer in a wide range of roles. And the rock band Kante transformed into a Greek chorus in Friederike Heller's *Antigone* (Schaubühne, Berlin, 2011). Kante continues to imprint its musical style and physical presence on many of Heller's productions.

The use of music as an integral rather than incidental part of theatre productions and the inclusion of musicianship in the performative registers of theatrical presentation and re-presentation have thus in the past decade transformed German theatre. These transformative approaches to space, performance style, dramaturgies, and hierarchies between text and theatricality (in the sense of Roland Barthes's famous dictum that theatricality equals "theatre-minus-text" [1972:26]) have had an impact not only on theatre productions *within* established generic categories but have often called the boundaries between them into question.

Genre

As most contemporary theories of genre suggest, genre is not a given checklist of criteria, a "shopping-list" of "ingredients," but rather a cyclical process (see e.g., Stanfield 2012). It is a culturally and historically contingent dialogue framing artistic vocabularies and audience expectations. This also means that it is defined not (only) by qualities *intrinsic* to the work, but by its *contexts*: venues, festivals, artists' biographies, attributions by PR or the press, etc. Thom Luz's unique scenic creations, for example, have been presented in the context of the *Freie Szene* (independent theatre scene; Rote Fabrik Zürich, Kaserne Basel, Südpol Luzern), at renowned subsidized municipal theatres (Theater Basel, Residenztheater München, Schauspiel Hannover), opera houses (Staatsoper unter den Linden, Berlin), and museums (Tinguely Museum Basel). These contexts have thus provided distinctly different frames for experiencing, categorizing, and evaluating performances.

In this vein, German theatre continues to blur genres and Sparten at the intersection of two complementary (but often quite separate) movements. On the one hand is dramatic theatre's increasing use of music or sound more prominently and self-sufficiently, thus resembling concerts, song cabarets, gigs, radio plays, or even musicals and opera. On the other hand, contemporary music theatre—be it by seasoned composers such as Heiner Goebbels, Ruedi Häusermann, Manos Tsangaris, Carola Bauckholt, Daniel Ott, or by some among the younger generation of artists, such as Stefan Prins, Ondřej Adámek, Brigitte Witzenhause, Sarah Nemtsov, and Malin Bång[24]—has embraced theatricality and/or performativity, moving toward forms of site-specific performance, devised theatre, sound and multimedia installations, staged concerts, and dance (Brüstle 2013; Hartung 2019; Rebstock and Roesner 2012).

For example, in 2015 Theater Bremen organized the symposium "Musik Theater Musik"[25] after it premiered director Armin Petras's adaptation of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (2014), which was set to music by composers Thomas Kürstner and Sebastian Vogel. *Anna Karenina* did not fit any generic

24. Many of these had works/performances commissioned by Ott and Tsangaris for the Munich Biennale, Festival for New Music Theatre (2016–present).

25. See https://theaterbremen.de/de_DE/programm/symposium-musik-theater-musik.1035853.

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boxes. It featured opera singers as well as actors, an orchestra as well as synthesizers and acoustic guitars. Its musical language flirted with a range of styles:

> It featured music in an eclectic as well as epigonal style, in which everything can be heard: classical, romantic, expressionistic, neoclassicist, jazzy, folkloristic, and much more. A skillfully put-together theatre music, within which one should not even try to find new "opera." (Schalz-Laurenze 2014)

The composers themselves stated this was "no work of opera in the traditional sense, but music theatre material for orchestra, singers, and actors" (Theater Bremen 2014).

Similar genre fluidities can be found between theatre and concert. Heiner Goebbels often labels his works "staged concerts," and rather than premiering them in concert halls, he sets them in theatres,[26] making use of elaborate lighting systems and stage design (by Klaus Grünberg) (Roesner and Grünberg 2019). Goebbels employs both classical and rock instruments, invented and modified instruments, classical and found voices. He freely combines actors, singers, dancers of various backgrounds and trainings and challenges. He invites audiences to open themselves up to an experience for which they may lack preconceptions and dispositions. For a concert, there may be more text, more theatricality, more movement than expected; for a theatre performance, there may be little narrative as well as extended periods of listening or watching for their own sake.[27]

Similarly (although stylistically quite different), actors who are musicians have increasingly found their way onto German stages. For example, Sebastian Nübling's adaptation of Navid Kermani's 2002 autobiographical text *Das Buch der von Neil Young Getöteten (The Book of Those Killed by Neil Young)* for the Thalia Theater, Hamburg, was titled *Die Nacht der von Neil Young Getöteten* (2019). The performance was spectacularly designed by Evi Bauer as a kind of rotating forest clearing, in which a group of lumberjack-styled individuals recited parts of Kermani's essay in between performing songs by Neil Young. The performance defied, however, any expectation one might have about a text recital or a rock concert. Actors hardly addressed the audience; more often than not, one couldn't see the acting for the trees. The songs faded in and out of Lars Wittershagen's theatre music score, which added an electronic layer as a kind of musical defamiliarization to Young's earthy rock. Six actors, supported by experienced band musician Carolina Bigge, all played electric guitars, building a wall of sound, an *impression* of the rock idiom, evoking rather than imitating Neil Young and thus avoiding a naive, tribute-band approach. The production deliberately defied expectations—and received praise precisely for this. Katrin Ullmann writes that Nübling's staging of a concert happens only in passing and without anyone hogging the limelight (2019).[28]

Another successful, pigeonhole-defying director is the above-mentioned Swiss Thom Luz, whose surreal stage inventions (often devised, but occasionally based on dramatic texts) have mesmerized critics and audiences. His productions combine absurd science, magic, stagecraft, music, found text, video, light and sound installations, concert music, and much more in a unique mixture that defies categorization. On Luz's being awarded the Swiss Theatre Award 2019, jury member Mathias Balzer wrote:

> A single searchlight and an old mirror reflecting the cone of light into the darkness: that's all it takes for Thom Luz to dazzle his audience. His is a theatre of ephemeral phenomena and, as such, one that enables us to experience time itself. It is inhabited by spirits,

26. Most notably, the Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne, but also the Theater Gießen, the industrial venues of the Ruhrtriennale, and the Züricher Schauspielhaus.

27. Much more detailed and nuanced thoughts on Goebbels's aesthetics can be found in his *Aesthetics of Absence* (2015).

28. Among other directors or companies who have explored the aesthetics of "staged concerts" in the past decade (and often even before) include Nico and the Navigators, Sasha Waltz, Christoph Marthaler, Damian Rebgetz, subbotnik, Christian Grammel, STEGREIF.orchester, Ensemble Mosaik, and Quartett PLUS 1.

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Figure 3. Felix Knopp in Die Nacht der von Neil Young Getöteten *(The Night of Those Killed by Neil Young), directed by Sebastian Nübling, music by Lars Wittershagen and Carolina Bigge. Thalia Theater, Hamburg, 2019. (Photo by Armin Smailovic)*

> mists, flickering candles, and recurrent, mesmerizing music. This is a theatre that conjures nimble-footed magic from the cumbersome stage machinery and old-fashioned piano. (Bundesamt für Kultur 2019)

Contrary to other directors who may cross-reference (or, put less academically, flirt with) genres and generic expectations, tapping into dispositifs of dance, recital, karaoke, video art, etc., Luz's creations are highly individual and seem to create and inhabit their very own world, in which the stage itself becomes an instrument and sonic machine.

Luz's project *Olympiapark in the Dark* (2019), for example, uses Charles Ives's short composition *Central Park in the Dark* (1906) as an inspiration and starting point. As a new arrival in Munich, Luz seeks to thematically explore the city through the lens of its musical and sonic history. In a guest lecture at the department for theatre studies at LMU Munich he explained that he wants the performance to be understood as an invitation to perceive the world as musical. Daniele Pintaudi opens the performance with the gesture of drawing a frame around most of the black box stage, on which the audience looks down from their raked seating. The frame is immaterial, though, conjured up through a laser beam hitting a series of small mirrors and being reflected in 90-degree angels around the front of the stage. Like Ives, who drew a compositional frame around the sounds of nature in Central Park, we are now encouraged *visually* to look at the ensuing performance as music theatre—even though for most of it we are told by the performers to be witnessing merely the preparations for a concert to be held at the end of the performance.

The attention then shifts from the presentational space to the performance space, since the actor-musicians become audible first from outside before entering the space via the landing usually reserved for lighting technicians near the rear of the house. They are seemingly introduced to the new space by a guide, but since they all talk in a cluster of voices, little detail can be made out.

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Already we are invited to concentrate on the sound rather than the semantics of this vocal cloud that passes through the entire space, down a spiral staircase, then out into the lobby again and back with equipment and musical instruments.

Many props onstage are transformed into instruments: bubble wrap and a tray with pebbles become percussive sound sources; a stepladder is turned into a mallet instrument first by hitting its steps, which sound higher as they get smaller, then by climbing it, in a combination of movement and sound known as "Mickey Mousing," and by the solfège of the actor-musicians. Luz furthermore combines live and mediated sounds: the steps, breaths, singing, and speaking onstage are recorded and played back, sometimes layered or looped, through individual moveable active speakers. This renders them *objets sonore* or sound objects in two ways: they become short musical units (see Schaeffer 2017:213; see also Augoyard and Torgue 2005:6), and they come together as "an acoustic action and a listening intention" (213). In addition, they are objects that sound, but the speakers are deliberately not staged as "transparent" media, not mere neutral amplifiers of sound but moveable objects, the acoustic properties and sonic behaviors of which are brought carefully into focus.

Finally, there is quite a playful and ironic shift from video to notation, rendering moving images into a graphic score. Video artist Jonas Alsleben has filmed the performers on a day out in Olympiapark, small black dots in a wide landscape, following trails or walking up and down the hilly terrain. In the performance, this video is projected silently on a canvas, upon which two lines of staves have been drawn. The filmed individuals are thus transformed into moving noteheads and ephemeral instructions for the actor-musicians, who improvise a live rendition of this animated score. Other than being quite a funny scene, which elicits a chuckling response from the audience, it is also a whimsical stab at normative ideas of notation and "the work" in music theatre suggesting the composability of all materials in the tradition of Cage or Kagel. It calls the mediality and modality of music-theatrical performance into question: a film becomes a score, a score becomes impermanent, images become musical, sounds become objects, playing music becomes theatre, speaking becomes a composition, etc.

This also renders our ideas of genre (is this music theatre?) obsolete. Luz's piece is not Musiktheater in a traditional sense with its close links to (and rejections of) opera (see Clements 2001:534–45). But in a wider sense, there are connections to Marthaler, Kagel, and Alvin Lucier, all of whom have worked at the boundaries of Musiktheater, widening the frame in different directions. Looking at the performance in the context of "theatre music," therefore, is also not an attempt to categorize it, but to follow the trails of sound, music, and movement relationships in theatre, and to extrapolate some of the common questions across different but related phenomena. In the end, it remains a performance that defies categorization. In making us investigate the aesthetic conditions and processes of listening to and encountering our surroundings, it is wholly and innovatively metatheatrical.

This and many other productions and approaches in contemporary German theatre require the audience to abandon certain concepts of what to expect. If they do, they will discover new ways to attend performances suspended between generic conventions.

Migration

Migration and the experiences of refugees had a huge impact on German theatre even before Angela Merkel uttered the much-debated words "Wir schaffen das" (we will manage) at the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015 (see Schneider 2011; Sharifi 2017). Both through forms of social work and a range of different artistic practices, theatres reacted to the crisis, reflected it in productions, integrated migrant artists, and offered cultural experiences to refugees — both as spectators and collaborators. More than 70 theatres joined the initiative #refugeeswelcome.[29]

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29. See the list at www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11497:immer-mehr-theater-engagieren-sich-fuer-fluechtlinge&catid=1513&Itemid=60.

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Figure 4. Noah*, directed by Jessica Glause, Bavarian State Opera, Munich, 2016. (Photo by Wilfried Hösl)*

One of the most often produced new theatre texts reflecting the migration crisis was Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Schutzbefohlenen* (*Charges*; 2013), inspired by Aeschylus's *The Suppliants* (458 BCE). It features her trademark Sprachflächen, suggestive of choric performances. It was staged widely in Germany—including in Mannheim, Hamburg, Bremen, Bozen, Freiburg, Oberhausen, Wien, Göttingen, Nürnberg, Bochum, as well as in Zürich—often using music as well as choric speaking and singing to come to grips with the textual overflow.[30]

If we look at further examples of work dedicated to practices of *Willkommenskultur* (welcome culture), it isn't too far-fetched to argue that music has played a key role in the processes of integration, representation, communication, participation, celebration, and reflection within migrant, or rather postmigrant theatre.[31] Miriam Tscholl, Barbara Kantel, and Wanja Saatkamp's initiative, Montagscafé (Monday's Café), a transcultural meeting place at the Staatsschauspiel Dresden; and Jessica Glause's three integrative opera projects—*Noah* (2016), *Moses* (2017), and *Eva und Adam* (2019)—at the Bavarian State Opera (with musical supervision by Benedikt Brachtel) are among such works.

In Glause's projects, which mixed young performers from Munich (some migrants, some not) with recently arrived refugees, originating from countries such as Afghanistan and Syria, music became a central shared practice, instrumental in "forming a group beyond language barriers" (Glause 2021). The projects each used one European opera dealing with a universally shared myth as a starting point and core material, such as Benjamin Britten's *Noye's Fludde* (1958) on the story of Noah and the Ark. This opera, particularly its choric passages, formed a starting point for rehearsals and the dramaturgical backbone of the ultimate performance. As

30. See also Descourvières, Marx, and Rättig (2006); Haß (1993); and Powell and Bethman (2008).

31. Azadeh Sharifi uses "postmigrant" to mark the difference between today's theatre forms and those theatres founded during the first waves of immigration to Germany in the 1960s–1980s. It is now a theatre by artists, she argues, "who do not feel they belong to one culture, but are in a process of finding their culture and identity, in which old traditions are accepted and present with a different perspective" (2011:42).

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the group learned to sing this music, this diverse group of young performers came together to form a choir.

A second equally important element of the project were Glause's talks with performers about music that had particular meaning for them. Afghan and Kurdish songs, Arab Rap, but also international pop music were adapted for the accompanying orchestra and performed. The orchestra, a quintessentially European institution, was sometimes complemented by instruments such as the Turkish saz (or baglama) and often had to follow the individual non-Western rhythms and intonations of the singers. The resulting collage of music was interspersed with text crafted from interviews with or writings by the young performers, as the director told me (Glause 2021). Music became an essential tool to instigate a process of mutual acquaintance, to form a group identity, and to generate material for performance. While deviating from the prescriptive text of the opera, musical collage became a central dramaturgic principle, and the resulting eclectic mix of styles, idioms, and timbres led to an aesthetic that celebrated both unity and difference.

In projects like these, music allows for a form of dialogue beyond language barriers; it is emotional and deeply connected with shared, personal biographies and geographies. Pieter Verstraete attests that "post-migrant theatre projects [...] address the representation of heterogeneous, interconnected communities through hybrid sound and music practices by challenging aurality as a space of contestation rather than homogenisation" (2012:170).

Outlook

If one did a "word cloud" of the debates and discourses around German theatre in the arts sections and journals of the 2010s, the main topics would differ from those I have explored in this article. We would find commentary on the digitization of theatre (culminating in an almost total transition to streaming performances or their recordings during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic), theatre's various responses to themes of migration and the presence of migrants, to the #MeToo movement, to gender imbalance among directors and artistic directors, to the challenges of populism and extremism, and at the Münchner Kammerspiele, a very ill-informed "debate" on the virtues of "acting" vs. "performance." Why—despite all of these pressing, relevant, local, and contemporary issues—should we talk about *music* in theatre, which after all has been, throughout its history, one of its oldest, most global, and most persistent elements?

Music's ongoing but continuously reinvented relationship with theatre pervades all these other developments with regard to content and form. Music is omnipresent in German theatre—hardly any production does not credit a composer, music curator, sound designer, DJ, voice artist, or other musical contributor. And while the role of music, musicality, and musical performance is still often conventional, even subservient, there are a number of ways in which this has changed. For many innovative theatre-makers in Germany today, music is a key element in the development of their artistic profile, during the conception of productions, in their creation and rehearsal process, in the performances themselves, and even in their marketing. Music has become a core strategy for how theatre-makers explore, shape, and communicate burning issues in contemporary theatre.

Let me offer some final examples to support this claim. Theater Dortmund's embrace of filmic and digital realities, under the artistic directorship of Kay Voges, would have been incomplete, possibly even unimaginable, without musical director Tommy Finke. Finke found a sound for Voges's aesthetic, as well as a solution to the challenges of synchronizing live performance and digital media (even, at times, across different cities), providing the performances with a unifying sonic temporality.[32]

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32. In an interview, Tommy Finke explained how his music served not only as an atmospheric through line in the production *Die Parallelwelt* (2018, dir. by Kay Voges), which was performed and live-broadcasted simultaneously at the Schauspiel Dortmund and the Berliner Ensemble, but also as a crucial reference point for the synchronization of the parallel performances (see Finke 2018).

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Figure 5. Jelena Kuljić, Bekim Latifi, Mehmet Sözer, Gro Swantje Kohlhof, and Edith Saldanha in Like Lovers Do (Memoirs of Medusa) *by Sivan Ben Yishai, directed by Pınar Karabulut, music by Daniel Murena. Münchner Kammerspiele, Munich, 2021. (Photo by Krafft Angerer)*

Some of the new generation of feminist directors focusing their work on gender and racial equity in German theatre such as Anta Helena Recke, Nora Abdel-Maksoud, Simone Dede Ayivi, and Pınar Karabulut found a voice not only through innovative casting and ways of reading texts new and old, or through playful and subversive scenic designs and costumes, but also through music—loud, rebellious, repurposed, subcultural, girly pop, girl power, and punk music, as well as music used ironically or to elicit emotions.

In the 2021 world premiere of Sivan Ben Yishai's *Like Lovers Do (Memoirs of Medusa)*, directed by Pınar Karabulut, Daniel Murena's music started and underscored much of the performance, which uses the Medusa myth as a point of departure for an explicitly worded "modern survey of the patriarchal gender model as a cross-cultural and epoch-spanning system of violence that reproduces itself thanks to toleration and support" (Munich Kammerspiele 2021). The piece starts with sparse but haunting sounds that vaguely resemble a bass drum and hi-hat but have an industrial feel to them, like distant clangs and sheerings from an echoey construction site. Disconcertingly—and this is a recurring principle throughout this piece—the rhythms of these sound out of kilter, refuse to fall into a clear pattern. A dimly lit figure dances along to these wonky beats; their look and movements are equally ambiguous and hard to interpret—a black female performer in a long blond wig moving a bit like a bird.

During a later sequence, Murena underscores long passages with only a few pizzicato notes hinting at a chord sequence. They sound like an isolated track from a pop song arrangement, played back on an unstable tape player, resulting in pitch shifts and intentionally poor tuning. Again, we can't quite place these sounds, can't quite interpret them—musically or semantically.

In between, Karabulut and Murena make more overt references to club culture and intersperse long choric passages of spoken word poetry with stylized dance sequences (see fig. 5): but again, the minimalist distorted bass lines, the alien costumes and makeup (by Teresa Vergho), and the robotic

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movements render these episodes opaque and defamiliarizing. Together, music and scene create a colorful but ambiguous surface: like Yishai's text, which avoids simple dichotomies (male/female, right/wrong, perpetrator/victim etc.), the look and sound of the performance make references to pop culture but never fall into clear idioms, never produce unequivocal meanings.

Despite all this evidence of invention and innovation in theatre music practices on German stages since 2010, it is lamentable that neither critics nor academics have given this phenomenon its due. Two of the leading theatre journals (*Theater heute* and *Die Deutsche Bühne*), which have an annual critics' survey to crown the best director, best actor, best play, best scenographer, etc., have no category for best music. And the list of published scholarship on the subject is still lamentably short.[33] Hopefully, theatre music will gain more resonance with audiences, critics, and academics in the near future — there is much to be discovered by anyone who lends it their ears.

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33. Among the few notable exceptions are Kramer (2014), Rost (2017), Schröder (2015), and Roesner (2019).

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