



Original production of
Virgil Thomson and
Gertrude Stein's *Four
Saints in Three Acts*,
Wadsworth Atheneum,
Hartford, 1934. Photo:
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Beinecke Library.

ERIC SALZMAN

SOME NOTES ON THE ORIGINS OF NEW MUSIC-THEATER

Dramma per musica is what Monteverdi called it. Every age seems to have had to reinvent it. Now it's our turn.

Music-theater has two contrary meanings. In one sense, it means any theatrical or performance work in which music plays an extended, primary role. In this definition, opera, operetta, and the musical are just localized forms of a large, general category. But, in English, music-theater is a relatively recent term coined to exclude all those traditional genres in favor of new kinds of music-and-theater mixes: antioperas, nonmusicals, performance art, multimedia, extended-voice extravaganzas, and the like.

As theater has moved towards nonlinear and even nonverbal forms, as performance art has crystallized out of dance theater and merged with music hall and pop concerts, and as new music has absorbed minimalist, Cagean, pop, vaudevillian, and non-Western influences, the old, broken alliance of theater and music has been restitched together in a multitude of new ways. And this impulse has been felt, often without collusion or coordination, in many disciplines and in many parts of the world.

Terminological confusion comes with the territory. When the neologism *music-theater* was proposed in the 1960s, it sounded like a translation from the German—which it was. *Musiktheater* was widely used in central Europe in the sixties and seventies to designate experimental forms of interaction between the concert stage and the theater (see the works of Stockhausen, Kagel, Ligeti, Berio, Bussotti, etc.). In translation, it was intended to distinguish those kinds of musico-theatrical performance works that clearly did not belong in the opera house, the Broadway theater, or the traditional concert stage.

Ironically, the term has proved to be only too successful and has been applied to virtually any form of theater that incorporates sung or danced music as a primary component. Instead of being reserved for a musico-theatrical third stream that has gained independence from both opera and musical theater, it has been used to describe almost any-



John Cage's New York debut at the Museum of Modern Art, 1943. Photo: Eric Shaal.

thing, up to and including commercial musicals. That leaves what may be the most important and characteristic art form of the turn of the millennium without a proper name. An attempt to sketch the as yet unwritten history of modern music-theater might help to sort out these confusions.

“Theater that sings” (to use a slogan I inadvertently coined for the American Music Theater Festival) is demonstrably older, more “normal,” and more widespread than spoken or prose theater. Popular musical entertainment goes back at least to Greco-Roman times and can be found in almost all cultures. Side by side with grand opera and Wagnerian music drama, *opere buffe*, *opéras comiques*, comic operas, *singspiele* and *songspiele*, operettas, cabarets, and musical comedies have continued to flourish right up to our own time.

Ever since its invention in Italy in 1600, opera has been constantly reinvented as music-theater—*dramma per musica*—because opera has always threatened to become, well, too operatic: too old, too showy, too devoted to its past, too removed from the concerns of its time. And, above all, too obsessed with *voce, voce, voce*. It is curious that somehow opera manages to be simultaneously too aristocratic and too popular, as well as too social, too outrageous, too bogged down in the status quo, too expensive, and too starstruck. Hence the long series of reforms by Monteverdi, Pergolesi, Gluck, Wagner, and Weill.

Opera and the more “serious” forms of music-theater have always perched uneasily at the conjunction of popular and high art. Reform movements alternate between two apparently contradictory aims: first, to introduce “higher” artistic ambitions to a complex and expensive art that always threatens to degenerate into mere popular entertainment; and, second, to simplify and popularize an aristocratic, connoisseur’s form that has become too complex and byzantine and *too* upper-crust (a showcase for castrati and other virtuosi, a form of conspicuous consumption for social climbers, etc.). The twentieth century has tried its hand at both kinds of reform (reform opera and new music-theater) more than once, sometimes simultaneously.

New music-theater just before or during World War I includes the theatrical experiments of Schoenberg (*Pierrot Lunaire*, written for a cabaret performer) and Stravinsky (*L’histoire du soldat*, written for a wartime touring company). The so-called *zeitoper* and *songspiel* (Brecht’s pun on *singspiel*, the old German word for musical comedy) of Krenek, Hindemith, and Brecht-Weill followed in the twenties and thirties and had a big influence afterwards on the “serious” musical theater of Weill, Britten, Copland, Blitzstein, Bernstein, and Sondheim. Third-stream music-theater survived the depression, World War II, and the inroads of abstract modernism in part because of its theatrical connection and the emergence of off and off-off-Broadway. *Four Saints in Three Acts*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Street Scene*, *West Side Story*, and others emerged from the theater, not the opera house.

But the dominance of atonal modernism and serialism in musical life during the 1950s and 1960s drove a wide wedge between new music and any form of theater. Abstract or atonal modernism (mostly twelve-tone and serial music but also Cage-influenced aleatory work) was profoundly influenced by philosophical ideas from German idealism and Eastern philosophies. The abstract and idealized nature of instrumental music (and its technological successor, electronic music) allowed it to be pure and pre-



Cage’s *Variations V*, 1965, with Cage in left foreground and Merce Cunningham and Barbara Lloyd in the background. Photo: Hervé Gloaguen.

VOX CLAMANS, VOX HUMANA,
VOX HOMINIBUS

By Eric Salzman

I often tell the story about a “meet the artist” session at the American Music Theater Festival after the premiere of Philip Glass and Allen Ginsburg’s *Hydrogen Jukebox*, when the public insisted on referring to the work as an opera. Why, I asked, is a nontraditional, nonlinear, nonnarrative work, played in, on, and around projections, more choreographed than directed, an opera?

“Because,” came the immediate answer, “it is being sung by opera singers.”

Here, at last, is a reasonable definition of the differences among opera, musical, and music-theater. *Hydrogen Jukebox* is an opera because it is performed by opera singers, *Les misérables* is a musical because it is sung by musical-theater singers, and *The True Last Words of Dutch Schultz* is music-theater because Theo Bleckmann is a jazz/improvisational/extended-voice singer.

The point is not trivial. New music-theater has developed along with (and perhaps as a result of) postmodern musical styles, performance in nontraditional spaces, the use of electronic and digital media, and, not least, the evolution of singing styles.

A common cliché of the classical/operatic singing business is “there is only one correct way to sing.” For many years, this claim was undisputed. The first serious challenge to the prevailing operatic vocalism came not from new music or music-theater, but from the early-music movement and its revival of baroque opera.

We think of the modern, vibrato-based technique of opera singing as Italian, dating back to the early days of bel canto opera, but it actually developed in nineteenth-century Paris. The big supported and projected vocal sound with built-in vibrato that we associate with opera singing was unknown to Monteverdi and Mozart. It became the norm partly because of the romantic taste for the grandiose but also as a matter of economic necessity. Before 1800,

cise—two qualities that appealed to the modernist sensibility, which also prized abstraction in the visual arts and formalist, nonnarrative forms in dance. Language and the voice became subordinate or were treated instrumentally as sonic elements in a mix dominated by pure sound. The movement toward abstraction in all the arts was part of a general withdrawal inward and away from social concerns in the post-World War II (and, not coincidentally, McCarthy) period.

In this aesthetic, all the old Western prejudices against theater (and opera)—as vulgar, sensual, corrupting, dirty—reappeared. Musical theater, opera included, was thought to be about physicality and sexual aberration, dancing girls and seduced women who had to pay for their transgressions after long arias of extreme range and difficulty. Ironically, traditional opera, even with highly violent and sexual subjects, came to be regarded as supportive of the status quo both aesthetically and institutionally and, because it was supported by the well-to-do, was seen as acceptable and safe. However, in modern classical music, the door to the street was kept firmly closed so that the performance space could be carefully controlled and kept clean. New work was admitted only very sparingly and on certain conditions; in new music, the elimination of narrative and its musical partner, tonality, expunged all references to common language, musical or verbal.

Under these conditions, an enormous gap opened up between new music and all forms of musical and operatic theater, a gap that long looked to be unbridgeable. It used to be a cliché of opera criticism that opera died in 1924—the year of Puccini’s unfinished *Turandot* and Berg’s *Wozzeck*, generally considered the last operas to enter the repertory. In fact, the very notion of a standard operatic repertory coalesced soon after and has not changed much since.

Boulez once seriously proposed burning the world's opera houses. Wagner had talked about the invisible orchestra and even the invisible theater; Milton Babbitt went on to postulate the invisible audience. New music took on the trappings of scientific or mathematical research and the actual, flawed performance was inevitably a clumsy, inferior attempt to reach the Platonic ideal. Every composer and every composition had to reinvent the art of music from scratch. The doors to the concert hall and the studio were closed; no sound was allowed in from the outside; the public was literally expected to hold its breath (coughing, rustling of programs, and, on occasion, even applauding were discouraged in a systematic and almost amusing way). Modern music, hermetically sealed, was at its best a highly personal, lyric, or intellectual art, but not a dramatic one.

But you cannot do any form of theater, opera, or music-theater in such a hygienic, germfree environment. It was only after the decline of modernism that music-theater like *Brigadoon* reappeared once again out of the mists. Postmodernism threw the doors open and the sound of the street was allowed back inside. At the very moment critics were bemoaning the death of opera and the decadence of traditional musical, a new music-theater appeared outside the traditional venues. In a mere quarter century, it has gone from experimental performance art to a worldwide movement.

The major changes in musical life that permitted and encouraged the reemergence of music-theater were propelled by a number of factors, of which the ever-increasing influence of sound technology on musical culture was perhaps the most important. In effect, any sound and any form of music that exist have become available as part of a shared, common experience and as potential raw material for new art. The tape music and *musique*

European opera houses numbered their seats in the hundreds; a handful of aristocratic subscribers ran the show and vocal technique was simpler, more emotive in production, more ornate and varied in execution. The post-Napoleonic democratization of culture produced specialized, freelance labor in the artistic market and venture-capital impresarios set out to tap the wealth and expansive/expensive taste of the new bourgeoisie. That meant larger and more colorful orchestras, higher salaries for artists, bigger audiences, and, to pay for it all, much bigger opera houses. This, in turn, produced a new kind of singer whose job was to overtop the symphonic-size orchestra and fill vast, ornate spaces with thrilling sound.

The key to this kind of singing was vibrato. Before the 1830s vibrato was an ornamental device, not a technical foundation for tone production and projection. Even in Meyerbeer's early scores, the singer is directed to use vibrato as a specific expressive device; it was not yet automatically used everywhere. But shortly thereafter, loud, vibrato-based singing became the normal, nonstop technical basis of opera singing and remained unchallenged until very recently. Although we do not have any recordings to document this changeover, there is little doubt it took place. The new style of singing and the new breed of singer it engendered drove Rossini to quit the field at the height of his career; his highly florid vocal lines can only be, at best, approximated by big, vibrato-based voices.

Wagner hated Meyerbeer but Wagner's music would have been impossible to perform without Meyerbeerian singing. The method conquered Europe, Italy included, in only a few decades and the physical and economic requirements of romantic opera became dependent on the development of a singing technique that has been described as a fabulous kind of glorified shouting necessary, before amplification, to ride over the orchestra and fill the upper reaches of two- and three-thousand-seat houses. It is the vocal equivalent of dancing *en pointe* or the old-fashioned style of high-voiced Victorian declamation that dominated stage acting well into the twentieth century

(you can see this, oddly detached from any acoustic environment, in silent movies). This theatrical/vocal style is now totally gone except in the opera house, where the thrill of oversized singing has remained central.

The challenge to such singing came from the early-music movement, from musical modernism, and eventually from pop and non-Western music. The clean, flexible, “white” voice with little or no vibrato is the vocal equivalent of performance on early instruments, and “Mozart singing” has made inroads even in the opera house; “Handel singing,” “Monteverdi singing,” and even “Rameau singing” were not far behind. We might also speak of “Stravinsky singing” or even “Schoenberg singing”; a white vocal sound, particularly as produced by the high female voice, was long the vocal standard of the modern music repertory. A big, often uncontrolled vibrato betrays twelve-tone and serial music as much as it betrayed Rossini. Throughout the century, modern composers have favored singers with small, focused voices for aesthetic reasons but also because there is a much better chance of being able to distinguish one chromatic tone from the next. Although the female voice has often been dominant, the male head voice (including falsetto and countertenor) has also become important in early music, in folk harmony, in rock and roll, increasingly in new music, and now even in the opera house.

In the premicrophone era, high voices dominated all but very intimate public performances. Jeanette MacDonald sopranos and Irish or music hall tenors (how quickly we forget) were favored in both operetta and music hall; they ruled the Broadway and West End musicals, early sound movies, and even hit parade broadcasts. Gershwin songs were almost all originally written in high keys and transposed down only later. With the appearance of microphones, high-voice theater singing went into eclipse, but it has made a comeback in recent years in the work of Stephen Sondheim and in the Euromusical of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Claude-Michel Schönberg.

concrete of the 1950s, the conceptual works of Cage and the many artists influenced by him, the growing interest in pop, folk, and non-Western music as art, and the unexpected triumph of minimalism and neotonal music were all close consequences of a startling shift in musical life, which permitted the revival of the old theater-music collaboration.

The origins of new music-theater (I am, of course, using the term in the narrow sense) in the 1950s and 1960s are connected with the enormous social and technological upheavals of the times. In effect, music-theater emerged from a complex of new performance situations and forms: happenings and mixed-media experiments, the ritualistic and wonderfully eccentric music-theater of Harry Partch, the chance music of John Cage, the conceptual theater pieces of Mauricio Kagel and Luciano Berio, the theatricalization of the concert hall by composers like George Crumb, Peter Maxwell Davies, and myself. It also had important roots in experimental theater and in the physical music-theater of new dance; the small-theater movement and dance theater both had strong tendencies to replace traditional literary and choreographic vocabularies with music-driven performance. The emergence of performance art was also a major factor; performance art, like experimental theater and dance, wasn’t always music-theater, but it usually had a strong musical or musico-verbal component.

Performance spaces and organizations originally set up for dance (Dance Theater Workshop in New York) or the visual arts (the Kitchen in New York, ICA in London) began to sponsor events under the rubric of performance art. Performance artists like Laurie Anderson, Diamanda Galás, and Robert Ashley mixed words, music, mime, and media. Avant-garde vaudevilles, modern music-hall performance, and serious-fun

ensembles like Stomp and Blue Man Group created a kind of physicality in performances dominated by musical rhythm. The music contained familiar elements but the forms were new. The traditional opera-by-numbers scheme (musical numbers alternating with dialogue, as in musicals or operettas, or with Stravinskyan recitative) and the big Wagnerian symphonic forms can still be found in modernist opera, but nowadays most new music-theater work creates its own organic structures.

Many, but not all, of these works used important, often unusual vocal and textual elements, including spoken and rhythmic speech,

As the female low voice declined in opera and classical concert music (contraltos have long since vanished while mezzo-sopranos have simply pushed ever higher into soprano territory in both range and quality), the low pop voice rose to prominence, with Broadway beltters, rock and rollers, blues and cabaret singers, country mezzos, Elvis baritones, and the Broadway “lyric baritones” all displacing old-fashioned sopranos and tenors in leading theater and pop roles.

The modern resurgence of low pop, jazz, and folk vocalism and its entry into the concert and theater stages became possible with the all but universal use of amplification. Microphones allow soft, nonprojected voices in low registers to soar over the loudest orchestra and to be heard in the far reaches of the largest theaters



Final scene from Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, 1976. Photo: Babbette Mangolte.



Bob Telson and Lee Breuer's *The Gospel at Colonus*, 1984. Photo: Beatriz Schiller.

vocal noise, and nontraditional singing. Partch, who invented and built his own instruments and used microtonal scales, also developed his own methods of singing and intoning texts. Meredith Monk is perhaps the most famous exponent of nonconventional vocal styles, but the use of experimental vocal techniques derived from pop music or non-Western singing has become widespread. With the help of microphones, various kinds of singing styles may be employed, even within a single piece. Close collaborations between composers and particular performers (sometimes one and the same person) have played a big role in the evolution of vocal style in recent years. This trend, which began with Kurt Weill's roles for Lotte Lenya, Luciano Berio's for Cathy Berberian, and

Peter Maxwell Davies' *Songs for a Mad King*, written for Roy Hart, continues today with Joan LaBarbara (music of Morton Subotnick), Rinde Eckert (music of Paul Dresher), Theo Bleckmann (music of Kirk Nurock, *The True Last Words of Dutch Schultz* by Valeria Vasilevski and myself), and others. The impact of contemporary popular, Broadway, gospel, jazz, cabaret, and even non-Western singing styles on the evolution of new music-theater work is equally important; you don't have to be a trained opera singer to project your voice to the second balcony these days. Ninety-nine-seat theaters and/or the ubiquitous microphone take care of the problem (see sidebar on the new vocalism).

In the 1970s, a number of performance groups (including my Quog Music-Theater) devoted themselves to the creation of new music-theater, largely in ensemble form. In the 1980s, several organizations sponsored a more formal presentation of new opera and music-theater work, including the Fires of London, the American Music Theater Festival (of which I was cofounder and artistic director), and Hans Werner Henze's new-opera biennial in Munich. Even the idea of the off- or off-off-Broadway musical has begun to change. The music-theater program for composers and writers at New York University started with a traditional Broadway orientation but almost immediately widened its scope to include experimental styles and forms. The influence of music-theater ideas on the new, serious off-Broadway musical can be found in the work of younger composers and writers like Michael John La Chiusa and Adam Guettel.

The instrumentation of the new, small-scale music-theater is usually based on electronic and digital keyboards and percussion, to which other instruments may be added as soloists or even as participants in the stage action. The use of media and of

and halls. They have altered the possibilities of stage singing to the point of allowing actors to perform singing roles in rhythmic speech. With microphones, it is no longer necessary to project sound acoustically and, for the first time in a century or more, intimate singing in the theater again became possible.

Recording technology has an even wider significance in making many kinds of vocal expression—some at the extreme edges of possibility, others exotic or specialized—into familiar musical experiences. “Natural” styles, close to the speaking voice, and quiet, inner-directed vocalism become usable resources. Ironically, preindustrial vocal expression, created for and out of relatively small and even intimate social circumstances, has adapted itself to and been well diffused by technology.

Even as purists resist any hint of amplification in opera, the use of microphones to allow intimacy and permit natural—i.e., close to the speaking voice—styles in public performance is a major revolution. This concept of “natural” includes many kinds of pop singing, various world music styles, and an endless series of possibilities for the spoken, intoned, recited, declamatory, and *sprechstimme* delivery of text. Microphones also permit the complex articulation of spoken language and many levels of artistic/dramatic subtlety in performance, all of which are much more difficult (or impossible) to achieve in the highly stylized, unamplified medium of fabulous shouting—namely, traditional operatic singing.

The resulting proliferation of nonoperatic vocal styles in new music and music-theater has had a major influence not only on performance but on the creation of new work as well. The use of chest voice registers in the speaking range has made possible the stylistic influx of pop, folk, blues, jazz, and world music of various origins and technical requirements. Some of these ways of using the vocal chords are close to the conversational speaking voice or to simple declamation; others are more stylized and bardic in tone. Many involve a close relationship with language somewhere between chant, rap, Elizabethan declamation, and Method acting.

Theo Bleckmann in *The Last True Words of Dutch Schultz*, composed by Eric Salzman, written and directed by Valeria Vasilevski. Photo: Ben Van Oosterbosch.



Much of this work had its beginnings in concert music and recordings; it has increasingly become part of the new music-theater vocabulary. There is now a direct interaction with extended- or expanded-vocal techniques whose use is in part determined by theatrical context. Perhaps if we define opera as that theater form sung by opera singers, then new music-theater might be thought of as an art form created in good part by music-theater performers—nontraditional, extended, amplified vocalists.

The new vocalism, if we may call it that, often involves using and inventing material for the talents of particular performers. The creation of new work for specific artists has always been part of music and music-theater, but its significance has taken on some new, strong meanings in recent decades. The phenomenon of extended-voice singing (or extended-voice vocalism) is connected with the work of individual performers and composers associated with them. The model for this kind of singer was created by Roy Hart (Peter Maxwell Davies' *Songs for a Mad King* was originally written for him) and Cathy Berberian

technological amplification and processing is an inheritance from early experiments in multimedia and mixed media. Technology, especially in its latter-day digital forms, allows large-scale pieces in small-scale aesthetic, small physical space, and modest economic setting. It permits the importation of sonic and visual imagery from the outside world as well as the modification and interaction of sounds and images. This fascination with new technologies is prominent in much recent work. Computer composer Tod Machover has realized several theatrical projects employing technological means, notably *VALIS*, an environmental performance piece based on Philip K. Dick, and, most recently, *Brain Opera*, an interactive, walk-through music-theater performance installation. The performance artist Pamela Z uses an instrument called the BodySynth, which translates her physical movements into triggers that activate sampled sounds and can also modify the sound of her amplified voice.

In spite of the strong presence of media and technology in much new work, live performance and the voice continue to play major roles. Performance art and its music-theater offshoots are performer based and most of the outstanding performer-creators working in this particular music-theater category are singers. The physicality of performers on the stage engaged in vocal performance remains surprisingly important even when enlarged or surrounded by technological means.

Language and narrative also continue to play an important role in much of this work, and this is a major, still relatively unexplored subject. The relationships between text and music are no longer simple or straightforward, but their interaction is fundamental. A whole subgenre of music-theater work, particularly common in Europe, concerns itself with opera and music-theater—the forms and the institutions themselves—and also with language as both sign and sound. This often takes the form of metaopera (opera or music-theater about opera's forms, techniques, institutions, or social structures) and reflects the European fascination with semantics and semiotics. On the other hand, particularly in America, there is also a distinct revival of unconventional storytelling, often influenced by non-Western narrative.

The physicality of acting in a music-theater piece (narrative or otherwise) is distinctly opposed to current film- or television-based styles of performing. Opera and music-theater in all forms are, by their very nature, unrealistic. The performer's timing, movement, and interaction are inherent in or dictated by the music more than by the text. This situation is familiar to dancers and choreographers, which partly explains why the dance world has, in America at least, played a major role in generating new ideas in performance art and music-theater. On the other hand, new music-theater also plays

(particularly her performances of *Aria with Fontana Mix* by John Cage, two or three works by her one-time husband Luciano Berio, and her own *Stripsody*). This challenge was taken up in the 1970s by workshop and performance ensembles, including Kirk Nurock's Natural Sound Workshop and my own Quog Music-Theater. 1960s and 1970s concert works in theatrical form exploring emotive vocal sound include György Ligeti's *Aventures*, my *Nude Paper Sermon* and *Foxes and Hedgehogs*, and several works of Mauricio Kagel. More recently, individual artists like Meredith Monk have again come to the fore. Monk makes most of her pieces for herself and her own vocal ensemble, although she has also worked with traditionally trained singers (*Atlas*, for example, was commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera and the American Music-Theater Festival).

Extended voice deserves an extended treatment on its own, with contributions from the practitioners themselves. As yet there is no single or accepted body of ideas, sounds, or methods involved; the sounds and techniques are borrowed or invented by the performers themselves, generally for specific expressive purposes. Besides the influence of jazz and non-Western cultures, the musical employment of nonverbal, nonpitched sounds, human and otherwise, is notable. The development of extended-voice singing in the United States has been closely identified with performance art (Diamanda Galás, Rinde Eckert) and with jazz and improvisational music (Bobby McFerrin, Theo Bleckmann). Many of these performers and performances blur the lines between composer and performer, between improvisation and written music, between acoustic and electronically extended performance, between jazz, rock/pop, and so-called modern music.

Amplification is essential to this new theater vocalism. A wide range of expressive sound from the merest whisper on up can be transmitted in public performance, and technology permits the alteration and transmogrification of vocal sounds and also allows them to be used to trigger other events, sonic, visual, and otherwise. The possibilities in this area are great

and their exploration is only in an early stage. The advent of digital sound and the techniques of sampling offer a tremendous expansion of this performance technology in terms of both possibilities and ease of use. Music-theater can exist without the human voice, but that oldest of musical instruments continues to hold center stage in most new music-theater work. However, our idea of what constitutes normal singing and vocalizing is changing rapidly.

The expressive range of classical operatic singing is extremely limited, much as the acting range in traditional theater was conditioned by the economic need for performers to fill bigger and bigger houses. The microphone, able to project intimate vocal expression and style, has changed all that, and the implications are only beginning to be understood. Vocal style as an expression of character had only a small play in the old opera and operetta; modern possibilities are enormously wider. The notion of the performer's personality, real or assumed, is intimately tied up with the use of voice, and the microphone allows musical common practice to mix with musical or sonic inventions. The theater, even more than the concert hall, becomes less of a closed space and more of a transducer, a medium or message taker as well as sender.

No longer can composers create new music or new music-theater for voices without some specific understanding of the kinds of performers and techniques involved, and performers themselves have increasingly become creators or cocreators as new kinds of vocalism, in conjunction with technological transmission, amplification, and modification, present an enormous array of choices. These choices offer a wide array of vocal types and a complex palette of expression, extending in one direction toward traditional language and theater forms and in the other to nonverbal and emotive expression. *Vox clamans* indeed. Hopefully not *in deserto*.

with abstract ideas and real or assumed personalities, elements that are more theatrical than choreographic.

Music-theater's links to popular theater and popular music (and hence with the world of commercial theater) are more complex. The mutual connections of minimalism à la Philip Glass and pop music have been hugely influential (Glass was, early in his career, music director of Mabou Mines and has written many music-theater works as well as more conventional operas). John Moran used lip synching (shades of Dennis Potter) and Mikel Rouse's work is based on pop media. The sound of pop techno music, often extended by the use of minimalist techniques, is common to a number of new music-theater works by younger composers.

The impulse to integrate music-theater with live pop music is a powerful one, and the idea has recurred in one form or another at least since Brecht and Weill. There are a few successes (*Evita*, *Rent*) and many pitfalls. Besides the obvious issues of cost and Broadwayization, the transfer of pop music—which is almost invariably about the energy and personality of the performer and often dependent on improvisation—to the objective, relatively fixed frame of a theater stage has always proved to be difficult. The history of Lee Breuer and Bob Telson's *The Gospel at Colonus* is instructive. Breuer's concept—the latter part of the Oedipus story told as a black gospel service—was brilliantly designed to use the energy and genius of real gospel performers, and the use of local gospel choirs was extremely successful wherever the piece traveled; however, in a Broadway theater with a union chorus, the piece failed.

The other side of the coin is the complex relationship of music-theater to opera. In Europe, where subsidized opera houses sponsor new work, often in studio theaters, and where operatically trained voices frequently perform it, new music-



theater often takes the form of metaopera or deconstructed opera. The theater works of Berio fall into this category, but perhaps the wittiest commentary on this subject was made by a non-European, John Cage, when he deconstructed traditional opera as *Europeras*.

In all these examples, the hybrid nature of the form and the mixture of elements are very typical. Reform opera and new music-theater are almost invariably a merging of the very old and the very new; their weaving of popular and high art is both innovative and a return to roots. In the process of neutralizing the old and giving birth to the new, old forms may be reformed or new forms reinvented; the avant-garde may be popularized or the popular avant-garded. Perhaps all of the above.

A scene from Tod Machover's *VALIS*.
Photo: Anne Marie Stein.



Teresa Marrin playing a Digital Baton, Maribeth Back playing a Rhythm Tree Pod, and Gesture Wall Sensors in Machover's *Brain Opera*. Photo: MIT Media Lab.

Music-theater, as an alternative to modern opera and to the traditional musical, makes sense economically as well as artistically. When huge resources have to be invested in big productions, the risks are greater, the chances taken are fewer, and the falls are harder. In the good old days, wages were low, new productions were cheap, and new work was rehearsed until ready: Verdi had two or three new operas on the boards every year and Gershwin played in a Broadway pit every night of the week, interpolating his songs into the current hit while getting ready to compose the next one. There were seventeen opera houses in seventeenth-century Venice and seventeen musicals running simultaneously on Broadway in 1927.

The situation is very different today. The opera house is not a congenial place for new work, the Broadway-style musical is no longer innovative, and both are high-rent, multimillion-dollar locales. There is a conspicuous lack of stable, forward-looking institutions devoted to music-theater as an art form, and the modern system of readings and workshops is not a viable substitute. Contemporary music-theater needs a modest milieu, a low-stake, ongoing situation in which new work can flourish and creators can work in close contact with performers and the public without huge outlays of cash. New work needs to be produced in a small, sympathetic environment. In such an ideal setting, audiences, performers, and creators would be able to collaborate on a regular basis.

The revival of music-theater is an accomplished fact in this country and worldwide and will continue in one form or another. In a sense, music-theater as a new art form stands today in the same place that modern dance occupied half a century ago. It is a category, not a specific art form or medium, and, like modern dance, flows in many channels. It is the most social and collaborative of the art forms and the one that has the most potential to interact with its time and place. Its potential for reaching an audience is almost unlimited. So are the possibilities for diversion and commercialization, which will impede its artistic development. Amazingly enough, no organization, no theater whose primary goal is the development of new music-theater as an art form exists in this country. One of our first concerns must be to create such an institution.