



Up Front

Our title is *New Music-Theater*, and that's how we first thought of this issue. But really the hyphen should be moved: The focus turned out to be on *New-Music Theater*—music theater that isn't just contemporary, but experimental. There is a lot of theater with music around now, in a vast range of styles, and it's wildly popular in all its manifestations; from Dierdre Murray's lovely jazz-and-modernism opera *Running Man* to a lecture series at the Kitchen, every music-theater event I've gone to this last year has been packed, and the spectators have been young. Sometimes it seems as if the way images started to dominate text a generation ago is being paralleled by a new dominance of sound. As with theater of images, this is not necessarily a good thing. Sensuousness, emotional and intellectual complexity, social satire: music can add to them all. Unfortunately, in most music-theater it doesn't. When we started listening to tapes of pieces being "developed" as not-for-profit projects, a disheartening proportion was banally pre- or semi-Broadway. Only in the avant-garde—despite all that can be said against it and so often has—do artists seem free enough to ask hard questions and brave enough to look for new forms in response. Of course it's a sign of the poverty of the cultural system in the United States that NewOp took place in Montreal and that the best American music-theater artists are constantly struggling. But their inventiveness and seriousness, their perseverance, their works signify something much more important, and hopeful.

—*Erika Munk*

EXTENDED VOICES: REPORT FROM NEWOP8 IN MONTREAL

NewOp8, an international conference on new opera and music-theater held in Montreal in November 1999, began with *Les chants du Capricorne* [Capricorn songs], in which an artistic creation came to life in an abandoned studio. Wrapped in a shiny pink rubber

Pauline Vaillancourt
in Giacinto Scelsi's
*Les chants du
Capricorne*. Chants
Libres, Montreal.
Photo: Yves Dubé.

cape and adorned with unidentifiable (but female) body parts, Pauline Vaillancourt gave an accomplished solo performance as the sculpture-like creature who discovers breath, body, emotion, sound, and eventually silence. Giacinto Scelsi's 1972 wordless score for solo voice rarely surrenders to operatic convention; the character expresses her emotional and anatomical discoveries through a fluctuating and dynamic array of onomatopoeia: glottal stops and noises, exaggerated syllables, and extended trills. With a pair of tube-like horns sprouting from her head, Vaillancourt looks like somebody's severe hallucination of a Valkyrie, and the same might be said of Scelsi's vocal gymnastics.

This Pygmalion-like scenario was perfect to kick off a four-day investigation of new directions in music-theater. NewOp, founded in 1992 by Lukas Pairon and Dragan Klaić (originally as "Small Scale Opera and Music Theatre"), has previously convened in Brussels, Antwerp, Colmar, Copenhagen, Toronto, Cambridge, and Amsterdam. This year it focused on "Voice, Creation, and New Technology." Held at Montreal's Museum of Contemporary Art (in association with Washington-based Opera America and Montreal's Festival de la Voix), NewOp8 was the first to emphasize North American work. Composers, singers, librettists, producers, critics, and sound and technical designers from more than twenty countries assembled for performances, workshops, panels, and presentations. In the hallways and dining rooms they exchanged business cards, URLs, videotapes, and libretti; inside the museum's black-box theater they discussed everything from the mechanics of international coproductions to the place of the human voice in an era of dizzying technological change.

Many found Richard Armstrong's workshop on "extended voice" techniques the most inspiring event. Armstrong pointed out the ways in which urban industrial society forces us to reduce and narrow our vocal range; singers seeking greater expressiveness must also unlearn the self-consciousness instilled with traditional opera training. With extended voice study, vocalists can overcome the restrictions of conservatory training and discover the greater range of sounds they can produce. (The barriers may be psychological rather than technical.) The brief workshop Armstrong led with a music student yielded astonishing results; within minutes she emitted sounds that could easily have come from an engine, or an animal in the jungle. The audience murmured with enthusi-

asm and asked a lot of questions. “I want to compose those sounds,” remarked a German-accented composer, “but how do you write them down?” At dinner that evening an entire table of singers and producers agreed that new opera, whatever it is or becomes, must embrace the extended voice. To them Armstrong’s explorations offer more than just technical tools; they also suggest a liberating alternative to the dusty bel canto traditions opera still has not shaken off.

The scope of performances and presentations, however, revealed that music-theater has already leapt forward. Pamela Z and Rinde Eckert, both from the United States, performed recent works (discussed elsewhere in this issue), while others presented video and audio clips. Thomas Désy (from Vienna) showed his version of Beckett’s *How It Is* (created with zOoN musiktheater) and his witty deconstruction of Puccini (featuring a lifeless corpse which repeatedly sits up and cries for “Butterfly! Butterfly!”). Eddy Seesing (the Netherlands) displayed his video installation on opera sopranos; his canny camera catches and freezes the likes of Cheryl Studer and Jessye Norman grimacing in moments of bliss and agony. Susie Self, of Selfmade Music Theatre (Britain), sang an excerpt from Michael Christie’s *Medea* (based on the text by Dario Fo and Franca Rame). Anita Pantin (Venezuela) used animation to discuss her work on an opera about Frida Kahlo. Kristin Nordeval (Norway) shared videos of her *Divva Construction* series, in which the soprano interacts with sounds and spaces in various sites (including the Oslo subway).

As for new technology, Eric Salzman’s music-theater piece *Abel Gance in New York* set the tone, with the title character traveling between old and new worlds. In the first act, set on a boat arriving in New York harbor, Gance stands suspended between two civilizations: French and American, pre- and post-World War I, familiar and unfamiliar, traditional and modern. Salzman, librettist François Godin, and director Antoine Laprise drew on material from Gance’s notebooks and incorporated elegant black-and-white film sequences to evoke a moment in history when unimaginable new cinematic forms were being created. *Abel Gance*’s contemporary resonance was unmistakable; as Salzman remarked after the performance, “This is a piece about old technology at a conference on new technology.”

Though drawn to the new, Gance remained haunted by memories and nostalgia for what he left behind. In a similar way, the digital and virtual technology introduced at NewOp raised many questions about the changing form and context of music-theater. How much preprogrammed music and sound can be used in a “live” performance? When are computers just musical instruments, and when do they impose limits on the artists’ imagination? Is digital technology an incredible means for extending the human voice, or does it dehumanize opera’s greatest element?

Philippe de Paille demonstrated software for treating the voice synthetically, using harmonic layering and filtration systems to quantify a voice’s “data” and modify its parameters. As a striking example, de Paille demonstrated how he could record, filter, and elongate a cat’s meows, resulting in a kitty vibrato aria. (De Paille created the soundtrack for the film *Farinelli* with the same software, giving women’s voices greater ambiguity of timbre to make them sound like castrati.) The NewOp composers were fascinated; the vocalists looked worried. Some questioned the implications of treating voices in “live” performances; others eagerly inquired about the availability of the software. (Synthesis is not yet possible in real time.)

Atau Tanaka and composer Zack Settel showed us how interactive bioelectrical instruments can translate a performer’s muscular tensions and gestures into sounds. With sensors strapped to his muscles, Zettel stood and faced his laptop, advancing and retreating, flexing and relaxing, while preselected sounds changed in pitch and range. As he patched together the machines, Tanaka joked about what John Cage might have done with digital expertise—and why not? Tanaka and Settel consider their inventions portable instruments for skilled performers; they can extend the range of sound and aural experience in any composition.

Québécois multimedia artist Victor Pilon presented videotapes of the virtual-reality operas he has created with Michel Lemieux since 1992. In their early productions (*Pythagoras’ Breath* and *Grand Hôtel des Etrangers*), real singers and actors sat side by side on stage with prerecorded virtual figures. For their subsequent *Orfeo* they set up a VR studio just offstage; performers could exit a scene and appear seconds later in the virtual underworld. Pilon stressed the need to integrate technical elements into any produc-

tion's themes and even called for an end to "virtual realism" (merely reproducing realistic actions with VR) in favor of nonrealistic virtual reality.

Another evening, however, across town in the cavernous warehouse/performance space Usine C (Factory C), the realities behind virtual reality didn't seem so innocent. Granular Synthesis, an Austrian duo, presented the North American premiere of their new multimedia piece *POL* to a large and expectant urbane crowd in their twenties and thirties. We sat on the floor and gazed up at seven giant video screens (all displaying the same image) as the room shook with rhythmic electronic distortions played at earsplitting volume. The pulsating bass reverberations pounded our bodies. As volume, intensity, and speed increased to a nearly intolerable level, lights and colors flickered rapidly and imperceptibly on the screens; as the sound and static climaxed, we could see images of a woman (Diamanda Galás), aggressively presented as a series of body parts destroyed in the techno-frenzy. Packaged as an electronic media event, *POL* was nothing short of fascistic in its totalizing, woman-destroying, machine worship. (The audience was mostly angry or bored.)

What a relief that the final NewOp performance reaffirmed the value of human presence. José Evangelista's *La porte* [The gate], a "monodrama" adapted from a Kafka story and produced by Chants Libres, calls only for a percussionist and singer-narrator (Vaillancourt). As the soprano recounted a frustrated visitor's attempts to gain entrance to a great castle, she lighted candles to illuminate the dark stage, later extinguishing them one by one as hope dwindled. Despite the gloom of Kafka's conclusion, the performance served as a reminder that the human voice, extended but unprocessed, can tell the tales of a dark age as powerfully as any technology can. In Kafka's story, the door closes for good on a narrator just about to grasp the nature of his quest; it was a fitting end for NewOp, too, where music-theater advanced on the threshold of an invisible future.

—Tom Sellar