

Book Reviews



Martin Knust, *Sprachvertonung und Gestik in den Werken Richard Wagners*.

Einflüsse zeitgenössischer Rezitations- und Deklamationspraxis

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It is generally acknowledged that Wagner was 'a man of the theatre': He had a broad experience of, a practical engagement in, and a natural talent for more or less all aspects of contemporary stagecraft, and he is, furthermore, often considered the world's first *regisseur* (Hanslick was probably the first to accord this title to him – in *Aus dem Opernleben der Gegenwart*, vol. III (Berlin, 1884) – see for instance P. Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven and London, 2006), 4). And yet it has become a musicological commonplace to position Wagner as the inheritor of a certain 'emphatic' work-concept, which identifies the work as text, or as the *ideal*, rather than the *real* performance. This may, partly at least, be justified by (or at least be considered in accordance with) certain statements made by Wagner, such as one of the famous ones, made to Cosima during the process of composing *Parsifal*: 'Oh, I hate the thought of all those costumes and greasepaint! ... Having created the invisible orchestra, I now feel like inventing the invisible theater!' (*Cosima Wagner's diaries*, 23 September, 1878 – here quoted from Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004), 233). Stefan Kunze, Martin Knust informs us, has even gone so far as to infer the notion that 'Wagners Musikdrama ist imaginäres Theater', and that Wagner's work in general may be considered 'ein Produkt rein imaginärer szenischer Vorgänge, denen keinerlei theatralische Realität zukomme oder je zugekommen sei' (p. 76). And as Mary Ann Smart has pointed out, one might even say that Wagner has inspired a whole 'cult of the invisible' in contemporary opera studies (*Mimomania*, 164).

But the idea of Wagner's works as more text than performance, aimed at ideal rather than real performances, is not confined to 21st-century musicological trends. Dahlhaus, for one, formulated the matter in one paradigmatic version in the chapter 'Stildualismus' in *Die Musik des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden, 1980). Here he explained that a Rossini score – which make up the very antithesis to the work-as-text scores by Beethoven and Wagner – is to be understood as 'eine bloße Vorlage für eine Aufführung', where it is the performance which make up 'die entscheidende ästhetische Instanz' (*Die Musik*, 7–8). How ironic, then, to read Wagner's comment (in May 1852) to Liszt on his *Lohengrin* score, as quoted by Martin Knust: '... denn es ist eben nicht ein "Buch", sondern nur die Skizze zu einem Werke, das erst dann wahrhaft vorhanden ist, wenn es so an das Auge und Ohr zur sinnlichen Erscheinung gelangt, wie Du zuerst es dahin brachtest.' (p. 27).

In *Sprachvertonung und Gestik in den Werken Richard Wagners*, Martin Knust effectively argues against the notion of Wagner as a dreamer of imaginary works, unfounded in the realities of theatrical practicalities. The main purpose of the dissertation is to substantiate the argument that contemporary practices of 'Sprechkunst' (a concept that includes two more or less distinct modes of artful text-delivery: recitation and declamation) fundamentally influenced Wagner's compositional technique, particularly when composing vocal lines. In 19th-century theoretical writings on the subject, recitation involved the reading aloud of a text

(text in hand), while declamation, on the other hand, involved a unity of vocal and gestural performance (generally more passionate, no text in hand). Theatrical practice, however, did not necessarily follow such distinctions. Rather, the art of theatrical speech would always, in various ways, involve a combination of the vocal and the gestural, the acoustic and the visual. And certainly, as Knust shows, Wagner's own style of recitation – which he practised almost every evening in front of his family and friends, or sometimes in quasi-public contexts – in no way followed the detached style of, say, the famous contemporary recitator, Ludwig Tieck. On the contrary, he seems to have been completely absorbed in his own performances, identifying emotionally with the characters of the texts, gesturing theatrically along the way, being physically exhausted afterwards. He read Shakespeare aloud this way, Lope de Vega, Schiller, Aeschylus, Homer, Walter Scott, and so on and so forth. And of course he also tried out his own works – in various stages of their genesis – in such reciting sessions. In Martin Knust's view, these sessions were very important for Wagner's creative process: They were a means of testing texts for their qualities as vehicles for vocal performances, and often phrases would owe their fundamental melodic contours to this process. Therefore it is the contemporary practice of stylized, theatrical recitation and declamation, *not* the operatic recitative (as is generally assumed), which should be identified, Knust argues, as the historical basis for the speech-like qualities of much of Wagner's melodic writing.

Stressing the importance of theatrical performance for Wagner in the way Knust does, makes it tempting to understand Wagner not as a composer, but primarily as a designer of physical, musico-dramatic *actions*. No surprise, therefore, that Knust is sceptical, to say the least, of the traditional reluctance to accept Wagner's stage directions – not least those that pertain to gesture – as part of the work proper. In Dahlhaus' view, Knust states, such stage directions on gesture do not belong to the 'Werkcharakter' of a work (p. 78). In opposition to this view, an important strand of Knust's study consists in arguing that gesture is in fact an integral aspect of Wagner's works, and that indeed a very large part of Wagner's music is best understood as 'tönende Regieanweisung' (p. 14). What the music does is quite simply to describe the bodily gesture that it is meant to accompany. As Knust writes in conclusion: 'Der Sprechvortrag ist ein komplexes optisch-akustisches Phänomen und als solches in Wagners Musik aufgehoben. Sowohl die gestische Aktion als auch die Sprechtonfälle des Schauspieldarstellers sind darin eingegangen.' (p. 411). In his capacity of *regisseur*, Knust demonstrates, Wagner was extremely concerned with ensuring that the gestures of the singers correspond exactly with the gestures prefigured in the music. Most modern opera directors would no doubt hate and reject this line of thought – indeed, nor does Knust argue that modern stagings of Wagner should or could reconstruct Wagner's own stagings (see e.g. p. 416) – but for a historiographical study, perspectives are rich and fascinating. So, for instance, Knust is able to make a case for the assumption that the style of text-delivery and gesture, which seems to have remained a point of reference for Wagner throughout his life, and which, then, had a decisive influence on his approach to composition, was that of the theatrical style which he experienced in his youth in Dresden and Leipzig in the 1820s and 30s, primarily in popular plays belonging to genres such as vaudeville, 'Liederspiel', and – most prominently – melodrama.

Knust's dissertation contains and combines several studies: An account of the arts of theatrical text-delivery ('Sprechkunst'), mime, and gesture in Germany in the 19th century; a large and informative chapter which may be described as a theatrical biography of Wagner; a thorough, chronological account of Wagner's work as stage director of his own works; and finally, an analysis of the vocal writing of *all* of Wagner's stage-works – in an attempt to chart the speech-like qualities of his style as it develops in the course of his career, as well as the integration of gesture in the musical fabric and dramatic structure of the works.

It is, at first at least, somewhat striking that although Knust's methodological take on Wagner has everything to do with theatrical *performance*, there is no reference whatsoever in his work to methodological considerations in contemporary performance studies, or to current theoretical discussions of the concept of performativity. Also, Anglo-American Wagner-studies are practically absent from the otherwise very extensive and useful bibliography of the work (no mention, for instance, of the above mentioned contributions by Carnegie or Smart, dealing with related issues). Knust may have had good reasons for such choices, for certainly there is not much in his work that smacks of either academic tradition. Even so, there are common concerns, and his dissertation certainly makes up a welcome and informative addition to existing literature dealing with the historical dimension of questions of performativity.

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Nicholas Cook, *The Schenker Project. Culture, Race, and Music Theory in Fin-de-siècle Vienna*

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355 pp., illus.

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Hardly trained in Schenkerian theory at all, I might not be the obvious choice for reviewing a book on Heinrich Schenker. Yet, this is one of the most interesting books, I have read for years. Nicholas Cook takes on the challenging task to examine not just what is Schenker's project in terms of what he wanted to obtain, but to go beyond that asking how his aesthetic views, his aims, and his analytical tools were embedded in the culture of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Vienna. Music theory is viewed as an expression of values of a culture, where conscious views and choices are only the top of the iceberg, and shared values within that culture are at least as important. Cook states 'that Schenker's theory may be profitable understood as a discourse on the social and political at the same time that it is a discourse on the musical' (p. 9). On top of that, issues of race and place are included, as Schenker as a Jew of East-Galician origin was a member of Viennese culture only on certain conditions, he did not choose himself. As an outsider in terms of race and place of origin, Schenker had to fight even harder to be accepted as someone representing the values of classical music of which Vienna considered itself the centre. Cook suggests that this might be one reason, why Schenker stressed conservative and nationalistic positions which affected the grounds of his views on music theory and aesthetics.

It might not be a surprise that it is hard to give a fair impression of the richness of Cook's argument. The book comprises five large chapters, of which the first is called 'Foundations of the Schenker Project'. This is mainly discussions of Schenker in the context of the philosophy of his days, arguing that it is not a matter of 'influence', as most of his ideas were 'common currency' combined into a distinctive conception. 'More productive, then, is the attempt to recapture the connotations of what Schenker wrote, as for example when his theoretical terminology resonates with contemporary aesthetic, political, or racial discourses: such dimensions of meaning would have been taken for granted by Schenker's contemporaries, and there is nothing harder to recapture from the historical record than what is taken for granted.' (p. 46f.). This leads to discussions on his views in the context of formalist aesthetics and issues of musical logic. Second chapter, 'The Reluctant Modernist', argues that Schenker's views are founded in fin-de-siècle pessimism and that his 'critique of music formed, and