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Shifting identities : the musician as theatrical performer

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Cover Page



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CONCLUSION

The conclusion refers back to the initial questions of the research, recaptures the course of the text and contextualises my findings in the endeavour of the research project, which finally leads to revealing a new layer in the reduction-extension dichotomy. The project has its outset in my own artistic work, and the issues I encountered in practice while creating works with musicians as theatrical performers, led to the main research question I recall here:

How can a musician be transformed into a theatrical performer by reducing, denying, absorbing and adapting, or taking away essential elements of music making?

Coming from this initial question, the research project has unfolded in a theoretical and practical part. The contextualisation of the main subject - the musician-performer within the reductive approach - has led to two main areas of discussion that were not previously discussed in an academic discourse and needed theoretical framing: the concepts of extension and reduction, and the musician's professional identity. The first area can be further subdivided into two main segments:

- a) I related my work to others who apply reductive approaches, but also to the ones who create work with musicians as performers that do not necessarily follow this idea but rather pursue different paths and creation strategies. These considerations have flown into the two-fold concept of extension and reduction, with the aim to develop and understand a musician's theatrical activities, and how these activities might differ from her professional acts *as musician*. The model of extension and reduction offers a theoretical-conceptual framework for the analysis of musicians' performances in theatrical situations, a way to describe what musicians do (or don't do) in relation to the "usual" activities in their professional life; a new set of analytical tools to explore the nature of the musician's profession in general and in theatre and performance in particular.
- b) The concept provides food for thought for practitioners to get a different perception of what they do, how to work theatrically with or as musicians, and in which relations, traditions, aesthetic tendencies or conventions their creation strategies might be situated. This goes for music makers, but also for artists from other art forms: the idea of a musical choreography - using musical gestures for autonomous bodily movements while taking away certain features - can provide choreographers with ideas of how to work with musicians without having them to function as trained dancers or theatre actors.

The conceptualisation of the musician's professional activities is the second main area of discussion. I compared and reworked several existing theories, in order to finally develop a model describing what the musician actually does by establishing a combination of internal, external and contextual elements. This model allowed me to put extension and reduction into perspective, and to take the musician's acts as point of departure. The three-cornered model does not aim at a closed definition, but should be understood as a flexible way to describe and understand the musicians' activities. Additionally, the model offers a way to differentiate between musicians and other performing artists such as dancers and actors, and to relate these different professions in the observation and analysis of artistic work.

Recapturing

I have framed the professional identity of the musician in Chapter One. Based on what musicians do, I attempted to describe their profession in terms of internal, external and contextual elements. This was my point of departure: to investigate what it is that is actually extended or reduced, and which kinds of acts are potentially changing when they become theatrical. With the distinction between these three groups of elements, I aim to shed light on what the musician's profession is. This framework was then put into the context of contemporary music theatre in Chapter Two, relating the musician-performer to another important agent, the composer, or the composer-director. This was done to underline the relevance of this agent for contemporary music theatre in general, and also refers to my own artistic practice, in which I seek to combine the different activities of conceptualising, composing and directing experimental music theatrical performances and installations.

Chapter Three and Four have been devoted to the alleged opposing concepts of extension and reduction, forming the core of the book with the discussion of artistic work made by myself and others. Differences between the expansive and reductive approach were located in the contrasting nature of how musicians are challenged in performance: the expansive approach is driven by the fascination to see the musicians investing effort into performative assignments on top of their profession, communicating extra-musical and theatrical information to the audience apart from the already inherent theatricality in music making itself. Reductive approaches, on the other hand, deconstruct the musician's profession, take its elements apart and unsettle the ritual of music making. They produce a very different kind of tension and provide other tools to transform the musician into a theatrical performer, by creating gaps and spaces in-between the usually inseparable elements of the profession. These fascinating, and potentially irritating spaces invite the audience to "fill in the gaps" with individual imagination and meaning. Chapter Four deals with the analysis of my own artistic work, set in relation to other artists who also work with forms of reduction, such as Sam Taylor-Wood or Kris Verdonck. The choice for including artists from other art forms than music has been made in order to underline the lack of substantial practical work with reduction in the field of music compared to the expansive approach on the one hand, and on the other to make relevant connections to other art forms visible. It should not be unnoticed that most of the artistic works can be understood as direct elaboration of the theoretical framework in practice, seeking to explore the boundaries of what is possible to take away from the musician's profession.

In general, when specific elements of the profession are taken away, it becomes crucial what a composer or director decides to stage as "remainders". In *Thespian Play* and *almost equal / meistens gleich*, the removal of the instrument introduces the idea of musical choreographies, using the musical gesture unlocked from its usual effect - sound - as autonomous choreographic material. This is exactly where my interest as an artist is at its core: by taking away something that is usually present, I stage its absence and make it thereby explicit. The absent elements create space for individual imagination. The bodily movements of the musician remain, and become the central element of the performance. These "remaining movements", unlocked from their traditional purpose challenge what musicians do, yet they can only be performed by musicians. In Christina Kubisch's *Emergency Solos*, various objects such as a gas mask or a condom pulled over the instrument prevent the flutist from playing. Since all instrumental technique is blocked, one can

easily imagine that the work does not have to be performed by a flute player. However, only a flautist is able to experience the tension that this blocking of her usual habits and abilities as a professional flute player evokes, and to communicate this to an audience. For an actor this would be almost impossible, as she does not intimately know either the nature of flute playing nor the virtuosity being denied. In *almost equal / meistens gleich* the identity of the performers is even more nebulous. They neither produce sound nor perform exclusively musical movements that could immediately be recognised as such. The origin of the movements may be musical, but the result lies somewhere between dance and mime, performed by this kind of specialised and specifically well-trained musicians, and therefore offering new theatrical possibilities to have musicians as performers alongside dancers and actors.

With the distinction between expansive and reductive approaches I shed a different light on the way in which the performance of musicians, but also other performing artists might be analysed when they perform in inter- or multimedial stage pieces, and when they potentially go beyond the borders of their professions, reaching into other art forms than their own.

Absence

The reductive approach places music and the theatrical work with musicians into the larger artistic and aesthetic context of *absence* as contemporary strategy in theatre and performance. This larger context has theoretical roots in theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* (Lehmann 2005), developed at the end of the previous century: one of Lehmann's initial observations with regard to contemporary theatre is the absence of dramatic narration and other elements of traditional, mostly text-based theatre.²¹⁷ Performance work devised within an aesthetic of absence can have many different manifestations, from Heiner Goebbels' empty stage centre in *Eislermaterial*, to the entire absence of the performer in Kris Verdonck's *Dancer #1*. The aesthetic idea can be traced back to artists such as John Cage, and is reflected nowadays by the likes of Xavier Le Roy and William Forsythe. Heiner Goebbels, who frequently publishes articles next to his artistic work, has noted a number of ideas about a so-called "theatre of absence" (Goebbels 2010). A few of these are of interest to my discussion here, one being the absence of a story or narrative in the sense of psychological developments of one or more characters. Related to this is the absence of what might be called a clear theme or message of a piece or a play. Another idea is the use of an empty centre: literally, as an empty centre stage (such as in *Eislermaterial*), but also regarded as the absence of a visually centralised focus.

Goebbels develops more ideas specifically related to how *performers* as the main subject of attention might be staged within an aesthetic of absence: performers may hide their individual significance by turning their backs towards the audience and divide the spectator's attention, from the focus on individuals to a "collective protagonist". Such a division of attention can also be

²¹⁷ However, it is not Lehmann's objective to condense his observations towards an "aesthetic of absence". He points at elements of traditional theatre (such as character, narrative and text as leading medium) that are absent in many contemporary productions by artists such as Robert Wilson, Jan Lauwers and Jan Fabre. However, Lehmann does not explicitly focus on how performers would be involved in events in which absence plays a distinctive role. This is discussed more in depth by Gerald Siegmund (2006) with reference to dance and by Heiner Goebbels (2010) in the case of music theatre, to which my research adds the specific aspect of making central elements of the musician's profession absent. (see p. 136)

achieved by technical means, separating the actor's voices from their bodies and the musicians' sounds from their instruments. These approaches let the performer disappear from the centre of attention, with its extreme of the performer's disappearance from the stage altogether, as suggested at the end of Chapter Four.

The motivations for the use of absence as a creation strategy can differ, but there are several main stances shared by most of the artists mentioned. Absence can be a means against one-sided interpretation, a means for engaging an active participation of the audience. By creating "empty spaces", the audience is invited to bridge distances between what is expected and what is made absent, and create their own interpretation. The absence of a specific element, be it performative, musical or narrative, can evoke a specific tension, and an increased awareness of the audience: it has to fill in the empty spaces, the blank spots, in order to connect and to make sense of what happens on stage, and therefore each audience member creates an individual "story" or interpretation of what the events on stage could mean. Theatre scholar Helga Finter confirms this active role of the audience. She argues that when actors, for example, are deprived of text (which may be replaced by either recorded voices or text-projections) and merely perform in silence, the audience's desire projected onto the actor is amplified and enhances the experience of theatricality. (Finter 2011: 129)

The double logic of reductive approaches

The previous observations point at a connection that has been hinted at during several moments in the above. When I state that absence of specific elements might *enhance* theatricality, produce a *heightened* awareness or *increased* presence of the musician as performer, it already suggests that absence or reduction has some kind of relationship with phenomena of extension. As a result of my research into the reductive approach it became evident at several spots in the text that it is impossible to leave out its counterpart, the expansive approach. The reciprocal relationship between these two complementary poles of presence and absence grounds the closing argument of this study.

The final deconstruction of the reduction/extension-dichotomy results from the observation that reduction is mainly described from the point of view of the makers - composers, directors, musicians; but the artistic result might not necessarily communicate this strategy of reduction to the audience. By taking away, other possibilities of reception emerge, so that the musician's profession can actually be perceived as extended, from an audience's point of view. By cutting away or reducing one element, the audience's senses could be opened into other directions. This additional or different kind of openness, this *surplus* in perception, paradoxically results from the missing elements, and from the denial of central elements and often most intimate qualities of the musician. I call this the *double logic* of reductive approaches. My argument is in one line with music theatre dramaturg Regine Elzenheimer who observes contemporary relations between music and theatre in her text "Dramaturgien der (Ver)Störung". (Elzenheimer 2009) She argues that destruction in the sense of a loss of form and structure can also work as a condition for new

creative processes, and notes that "the destruction of fixed patterns of reception can aim at exposing different structures of perception." (Elzenheimer 2009: 21-22, my translation)²¹⁸

I have already traced this double logic at several moments, but for methodical and narrative reasons I chose not to discuss this aspect in all of the works where it might have been relevant. Despite this choice the aspect of a double logic can be traced in many, if not all of the works that have been discussed throughout the analysis of reduction in Chapter Four. In Kris Verdonck's *////* a machine takes over specific elements of the dancer's profession, while at the same time realising choreographic movements such as the "perfect pirouette" that are otherwise not possible. By reducing the dancer's profession, the machine extends her potential at the same time, yet this extension is only made possible as result of a reduction. A similar observation was made in the context of John Cage's *4'33"*, where the absence of music, or, more precise, the not-playing musician who is expected to play, intensifies the experience of the performer's body on stage.

When choreographer Xavier Le Roy elaborates on his approach to staging Lachenmann's composition *Salut für Caudwell* for two guitarists in which the guitars are taken away from the two visible performers, he implicitly supports the argument of the double logic by saying that "the strategy for the piece is to take away elements in order to discover other aspects of the listening experience [...]." (Le Roy 2006: n.p.) By taking the instruments away, Le Roy makes a different reception of Lachenmann's music possible, and even intensifies the experience of the many different extended techniques that are necessary to perform the composition as choreography. Le Roy takes the implied effect on the audience consciously into account, resulting from the instrument taken away in combination with the musico-choreographic movements:

Obviously, distortions, spacing, intervals appeared between what one looks at, what one listens to, what one hears that is written, what one sees and that is not written... These additional tensions immerse the audience in the music in another way; it is undoubtedly the reason the audience smiles, tenses, sighs, with deception or relief, expresses surprise, laughs and has all the other reactions seen on the faces of audience members during this performance. (Le Roy 2006: n.p.)

Similar kinds of audience reactions could be observed repeatedly during performances of *Thespian Play*, and I argue that this happens for similar reasons as with *Salut für Caudwell*. The absurdity of the different movements, especially by the performer's eyes and mouth, in combination with the playback-soundtrack, causes the audience to smile, laugh or utter other reactions that would certainly not happen if the pieces would have been played with the instruments. This is also where the surplus-value of *Thespian Play* is located: the performative acts that I have determined as central to the constitution of the musician's professional identity and what he effectively does, tend to twist the audience because the performer's gestures could belong to saxophone playing, but also to a dancer's or mime's movements. The absence of the instrument makes the musical gestures productive for different interpretations. Put differently, by taking away the instrument, the audience's imagination opens up and the musician-performer may be perceived also as mime, actor or dancer. I doubt whether the audience perceives the performer as "reduced". In spite of the missing instrument, the audience might rather see "more" than less. While the strategy for creating the piece has been reduction, this does not necessarily result in a reception that acknowledges reduction. On the contrary, the audience might perceive the musician's actions

²¹⁸ "[...] kann die Zerstörung eingefahrener Rezeptionsmuster auch auf die Freilegung anderer Wahrnehmungsstrukturen zielen."

in *Thespian Play* as extended, in the sense that he has to do all kinds of different things - especially miming - that he is not used to do, and which have a theatrical effect.

This double logic can also be applied to the extreme cases in which performers are absent. As suggested at the end of Chapter Four, the absence of the performer loads the theatre space with a specific presence that directly results from this absence. Because a performer is expected to take part in a theatrical performance, the objects (or whatever is on stage) can be charged with presence. This is quite similar to the heightened presence of the musician in *4'33"*, which is also grounded in the audience's expectation of music being played.

Here the discussion comes at the point where the dichotomy between extension and reduction dissolves: the individual imagination of the audience adds layers of meaning and fills in the emptied space or absence of specific performative elements, resulting in the perception of both reduction and extension simultaneously. The two concepts may be seen as two sides of the same coin: despite the differences in approach, working processes and artistic outcomes, both are strategies to work with musicians in theatre and performance in order to achieve a theatricalisation of the musician's activities, two ways to shift the musician's professional identity to become theatrical.