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The theses of the dissertation

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Composer on the Stage.
The Problem of Portraying the Artist in the Artist Operas of
Scriabin, Schoenberg and Pfitzner

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During the past ten years musicological research has showed growing interest in *meta-musical* phenomena and musical self-reflexivity, a trend which is more dominant in German but also present in the English language scholarly literature.

My dissertation endeavours to define a unique and somewhat neglected self-reflective musical genre, the *artist opera*. The genesis and development of this genre in the early 20th century is described by the comprehensive analysis of three fundamental pre-1918 musical representations of the artist character, i.e. Alexander Scriabin's *operatic fragment* (1900-1903), Arnold Schoenberg's *The Lucky Hand* (1913) and Hans Pfitzner's *Palestrina* (1917).

My dissertation sets out to investigate how the representation of the artist in these works relate to their creators, to their artistic self-identity, world-view, philosophy and their thought about the role of art and of artist.

The three works by Scriabin, Schoenberg and Pfitzner, and to that matter, a significant piece by Franz Schreker which is not highlighted in my dissertation, are related to each other not so much by their musical and structural similarities, but rather by their chosen topic: the protagonists are *composers*, and these works concentrate on their approach to the outside world and art.

The theoretical framework, which approaches the artist opera from two directions, is clarified in a longer introductory chapter.

Firstly, my dissertation investigates the musical-theatrical genre of the meta-opera which, in some way or another, reflects upon its own creation. Having summarised the musicological research into meta-musical phenomena, this section of my work argues that instrumental music is unable to express self-reflection (Steinbeck 2011: 10). By acknowledging the language-like features of the music, we may only listen to it *as if* it was self-reflective, and the alleged or real self-reflection of the composer may only be reconstructed in the discourse about the piece which follows its listening.

My reasoning follows Siegfried Oechsle and Claus Michael Ort who argue (Oechsle 2011: 95 and Ort 2005: 88) that meta-musical features can be identified most easily in a piece of music accompanied by text, and especially in musical-theatrical works, i.e. when the libretto raises questions about genre and poetics, or when it relates to the creative process (writing or composing) or the practical realisation (performance) of the work.

A short historical overview of the meta-operas in the 17th-19th century reveal two significant common features of such compositions: they mostly concentrate on the practical side of the development of modern theatre, and describe their protagonists - singers, actors, property men, or theatre directors - in a parodistic, satirical light. It is much more difficult to present

the artists in action: the poet writing the libretto, and even more so, the composer writing the music. Setting the composer on stage is a very sensitive issue as this character represents the artistic self and the artistic ethos of the creator of the (meta-)opera in the most direct way. Whether the composer who endeavours to give an account of the creative process in his piece could succeed at all is a recurring question in the research into the meta-opera. To what extent can this complex and difficult process be described by musical means or in another musical context? Is there any other means than musical quotation which could genuinely invoke a composer of the past?

In order to identify the common denominator of the *artist operas* by Scriabin, Schoenberg, Pfitzner and Schreker, i.e. to find the place of these pieces in the history of music, one should first investigate the development of the meta-opera. These artist operas cannot be classified undoubtedly as meta-operas, but this is only partly due to their inability to be labelled as meta-music as such. It is similarly important to emphasise that these artist operas do not show any sign of the ironic-satirical properties of the meta-operas in general, and in particular those created before the Great War.

It may be a symptom of the early 20th century zeitgeist that these composers and their works express a *grave* attitude towards the phenomena of artist and art. These operas are not created out of comical self-reflection; they are rather artistic credos, in a mostly tragic manner, dramatic compositions expressing the *philosophy* of their creator. These artist operas do not restrict themselves to give an account of the creative process, but they also raise questions about the personal destiny of the artist, his role in society, and they challenge the role of music itself. These works are therefore apparently closer to a specific literary genre, the *artist play*.

For this reason, secondly, my dissertation undertakes to identify the similarities between the artist play and the artist operas in question. In this respect, my work follows a traditional method already present in the early scholarly literature about the artist plays (Goldschmidt 1925 and Zohner 1926) which does not draw a sharp line between literary and musical plays and discusses them side by side. While Goldschmidt includes and, even more so, presents Richard Wagner's *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg* as the archetypal spirit of the 19th century development of the artist play represented by such authors as Goethe, Grillparzer, Heyden and Hebbel, Zohner discusses Wagner and he even provides a short analysis of Pfitzner's *Palestrina*.

Later historiography of the artist play also include operas, or more precisely, musical theatrical plays. For example, Sebastian Strauss' 2008 Munich dissertation (Zwischen

Narzissmus und Selbsthass. Das Bild des ästhetizistischen Künstlers im Theater der Jahrhundertwende und Zwischenkriegszeit), includes a complete chapter about Gustave Charpentier's operas *Louise* (1900) and *Julien* (1913) which were well-known and celebrated in their time, and it also discusses Schreker's *Der Ferne Klang* (1913) or Alexander von Zemlinsky's *Traumgörge* (1906).

The introductory paragraphs of scholarly works about the artist play offer a strikingly similar definition of this genre. Nina Birkner's outstanding monograph *From genius to media critic: Models of the artist-play in the 20th century* demonstrates (2009: 1) that the definition of the genre is almost unchanged since the time of Ludwig Tieck about 200 years ago: the artist-play is a theatrical piece which focuses on the destiny of one or more artists, and in which the dramatic tension originates in the protagonist's artistic background. The protagonist's uniqueness and alterity, his special position vis-à-vis the 'normal' outside world, a description common in public discourse, generate the conflict in the play (Japp 2004: 2). Another important feature of the artist-play is that, in contrary to other characters, the artist necessarily expresses a sort of self-referentiality.

The central question of my dissertation, which has been also raised in relation to the meta-opera, is the following: is it not actually the case that due to the characteristics of the medium only 'poet-plays' can exist? Can a composer, a sculptor or a painter appear genuinely on the stage, i.e. can the artist express himself by his own means, or is he restricted to the literary (poetic and philosophical) means which describe music and the fine arts? (Japp 2004: 4) Furthermore: how can stories about artists in music and the fine arts reflect upon the issues which are specific to these types of art? What other means are or should be required so that non-literary artistic expressions be present in the play?

It is undoubtedly problematic to describe representatives of all types of art by a single name and appellation; but this is exactly what the artist plays attempt to achieve. For this reason, these plays have to refrain from discussing special artistic problems, and they concentrate instead on the artists' general fate which is constructed according to genuine or alleged stereotypes, i.e. according to the problems of talent, success, love, solitude and power.

Is the state of the matter so much different in other types of art? Do non-literary artists (e.g. composers) have a better chance to succeed with artist plays in which the protagonist is a representative of their own type of art? Is there a crucial difference between artist plays and artist operas? My analysis of Scriabin, Schoenberg and Pfitzner attempts to provide answers for these dilemmas.

Another central question is whether it is sufficient to use a definition of the artist opera similar to the one of the artist play, i.e. a musical theatrical play which focuses on the destiny of one or more artists, and in which the dramatic tension originates in the artistic characteristics of the protagonist himself.

In order to justify my selection of artist operas by Scriabin, Schoenberg and Pfitzner (as well as Wagner and Schreker) in light of the general enterprise alluded to in the main title of my dissertation - description and analysis of composer characters in musical theatrical plays -, this definition has to be amended, or more precisely, it has to be complemented. In my understanding, the artist opera is a play in which the character of the artist is actually a means in the composer's hand for expressing his own *Weltanschauung* (Danuser 2009), by which he is able to communicate his philosophy (of art) through a piece of art. The corresponding necessary condition for such definition is that music and text should be created by one and the same person so that the two types of art could form a dissoluble bond and serve the common goal of grasping as completely and genuinely as possible what the composer thinks about himself and about his vocation.

The artist on stage, and especially the composer on stage, is crucial for the self-representation and image building process of the creator. The character on stage is an artistic construction just like the 'genuine' self of the artist which may be 'known' from his letters, diaries, statements and theoretical works. In her monograph about the artist operas by Pfitzner, Krenek and Hindemith, Claire Taylor Jay rightly states that there is a good chance that we would never ever get to know what the composer actually thought. According to Jay, every statement about art and artistic existence (e.g. an interview or an essay) is already an artistic construction catered for the public, and therefore it shows only those sides of the self which, according to the artist, belong to his artistic identity (Jay 2004: 194). It must be noted that for this very reason such artistic self-representations shed light on those attributes which are deemed crucial for the public image of the artist by their creators. Undoubtedly, such attributes can be grasped only by a synchronic investigation of the artist plays, theoretical essays, letters and interviews of the composer.

The Introduction is concluded with a short analysis of *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, the first opera dealing with the nature and goal of music and art with artists in the main roles. Richard Wagner's 1868 masterpiece is therefore the most important, and probably single, antecedent of the artist operas discussed in this dissertation.

The analysis of the three compositions, which are displayed as the most important artistic (self-)representations in the early 20th century history of music, follows a very similar pattern.

These chapters first discuss the opera in the context of the composer's oeuvre; they investigate the practical as well as theoretical circumstances of its creation. Special emphasis is given to the description of the composer's philosophy and theoretical work which reveals the sources and central concepts of his thought. These opening paragraphs also highlight the contradictions between the composer's literary statements and the philosophical-theoretical message transmitted in the 'statements' of his artwork.

There are many similarities between the representations of the artist characters and the corresponding theoretical issues discussed in our examples. For instance, each opera touches upon the difficult existence of the chosen genius as well as the unique relationship between the artist and the 'masses' (i.e. the society). The role of woman and love in the artist's life and work is likewise a central topic in all three operas.

Nevertheless, these composers provide different *models* (in the plural) inasmuch they give very different answers to very similar questions, and their ways of representation also differ to a great extent. The difference is not only due to the basic attributes of the chosen artist character, whether he is a real or a fictional one, whether this character can be related to the composer's biography or completely independent from it. It is similarly important to highlight the emphasis these composers give to the issues which occur in all three operas, or to consider in which areas of their life these artists on stage are happy and successful, and in which they are condemned to failure and damnation. A similarly important question is to what extent the composer's philosophy and *ars poetica* is expressed in these artist operas, and how these pieces can be related to the composer's theoretical work.

My *first example* is based on Alexandr Scriabin's unfinished opera which has not been discussed so far in the scholarly literature about artist operas and in the corresponding research into artist plays. The unfinished nature of this piece cannot fully account for such disregard; otherwise neither Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron* would deserve a place in the canon. The analysis of Scriabin's operatic fragment offers two main conclusions: first, that its artist character cannot be identified with the saviour genius which is predominant in Scriabin's later works culminating into the grandiose and likewise unfinished *Mysterium*; and second, that the opera can be interpreted as the completion or conclusion of one of Scriabin's most famous work (or at least its text version), *The Poem of Ecstasy*.

The *first example*, as noted above, is characterised by the belief in the artist's power and success. The protagonist of the operatic fragment and *The Poem of Ecstasy* is not only a man of poise and triumph in his private life, but he is also in complete control of her creative powers, and he is not in error about his role and mission towards humanity.

Solitude and rejection become dominant features in the *second example* which is based on Arnold Schoenberg's *The Lucky Hand*. On the one hand, the Man of the opera achieves significant success in face of the masses, he is able to make himself independent from threat and envy, and in this respect, he expresses certainty and confidence about his creative potential. On the other hand, my analysis raises the question whether the artist character of *The Lucky Hand* can hold to the values and philosophy articulated in Schönberg's theoretical works at the time of the composition.

With 'old' expressionist and 'new' rationalist features present in both content (text) and composition (music), *The Lucky Hand* may be justifiably called a *border work* which, on the one hand, has strong ties to the works created between 1908 and 1913, but which, on the other hand, foreshadows the post-1918 trends in Schoenberg's oeuvre.

The *third example* cannot be distinguished sharply from the second one: Hans Pfitzner's controversial artist character in the *Palestrina* achieves to save the music by creating a widely celebrated piece with angelic assistance, but this success does not bring him personal redemption, and he ends up as a broken, disillusioned old man at the end of the opera. Similarly to Schönberg, Pfitzner does not really succeed in genuinely describing artistic inspiration: the jump to the distant past and the musical quotations of the opera raise reasonable doubt in the listener and interpreter from a thematic as well as musical point of view.

The last example could therefore highlight the difficulty which is discussed throughout my dissertation that the border line between 'real' and 'set-on-stage' personality and thought of a composer can hardly be drawn in an indisputable fashion. If we nevertheless set out to deconstruct the artist characters in face of all these difficulties, we will hit the same old question whether it is justified to talk about the 'real' personality of a composer or we only have the possibility to compare the different roles catered for the outside world which always understands the artist *qua* artist and never as a 'real', 'normal' person like 'us'. Significant conclusions may be hopefully reached in such comparisons even without the solution of this age-old dilemma, because the composer of an artist opera is necessarily obliged to consider carefully what makes an artist, and the thought process definitely affects his self-image as well. A composer who decides to set a composer on stage steps himself on stage again and again.

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