

# Opera and Stage Today: Contemporariness in Its Hermeneutic Projection of the Present

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## Abstract

Many times when reflecting on opera, the fundamental role that scenography and stage direction have in the work is forgotten, especially when it comes to CD recordings or formats without images. This role is fundamental in 21st century opera productions, where reflections on the implications of the stage (as a space where a specific time passes, as a “house of music”) are extremely important and provide a specific meaning to the work. This paper develops the meaning of the hermeneutic criterion of futurity in the framework of contemporary opera and develops a concrete dialogue between theory and artistic representation to try to understand the real meaning of Contemporary Opera.

## Keywords

Contemporary Opera, Stage, True, la fura dels baus, Andrea Breth

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## 1. Introduction

*Art is knowledge and experiencing an artwork means sharing in that knowledge (Gadamer, Truth and method).*

Contemporariness as a present moment of history may appear to be a *contradictio in terminis*. Comprehending historical and artistic phenomena that have come to be in the present is the great task delayed after being enunciated.

Heidegger, who was the first to qualify the concept of comprehension as the universal determination of the there being, does use it to refer to the project nature of comprehension, i.e. the **futurity** (*Zukünftigkeit*) of the there being, buth, what about Contemporary Opera? How to approach its truth content from a Hermeneutic point of view?

## 2. Contemporary Opera as an Aesthetic Question

In a sense, we could say that Gadamer, one of the most important 20<sup>th</sup> century

philosophers of art does not delve into the comprehension of the contemporary work. Even when he mentions it, he immediately circles back to so-called *classical* art: “How can we find an all-embracing concept to cover both what art is today and what it has been in the past? The problem is that we cannot talk about great art as simply belonging to the past, any more than we can talk about modern art only becoming ‘pure’ art through the rejection of all significant content. This is a remarkable state of affairs. If we reflect for a moment and try to consider what it is that we mean when we talk about art, then we come up against a paradox. As far as so-called classical art is concerned [...]” (Gadamer, 1986). His approach to contemporary art and its comprehension is even more disheartening when he digs into the concept of play as an essential ingredient of art: “it seems a false antithesis to believe that there is an art of the past that can be enjoyed and an art of the present that supposedly forces us to participate in it by the subtle use of artistic technique” (Gadamer, 1986).

From my approach, the hermeneutic criterion of futurity opens up what pertains to the work in terms of enjoyment and play by its questioning of the being from the perspective of the new realities brought by global contemporariness, where the break value is much more decisive than the continuity value (Groys, 2005: p. 23).

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer speaks of an epoch as if there were epochal unity today, as if the historically and politically fragmented time of Globality were a whole made up of common features. The philosopher argues that “every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself” (Gadamer, 1999: p. 366). While it is true that in the 21st century the conditions are not in place for speaking of common epochal features, we can recognise a common world that would allow self-understanding of a wider ego with space for the multiple conditions of possibility of the contemporary subject.

Delving into contemporary music requires a self-understanding effort that even the philosopher himself appears to reject. Gadamer questions “the messianic consciousness of the nineteenth-century artist, who [...] as a social outsider pays the price for this claim, since with all his artistry he is only an artist for the sake of art. But what is all this compared to the alienation and shock with which the more recent forms of artistic expression in our century tax our self-understanding as a public?” (Gadamer, 1986). But I ask, did the contemporaries of Guillaume de Machaut or Beethoven not make the same self-understanding effort?

Other assertions are even more disconcerting due to their traditionalist nature, since they seem to settle into certain prejudices instead of taking them into account in order to overcome them hermeneutically, such as when he contends “I should like to maintain a tactful silence about the extreme difficulty faced by performing artists when they bring modern music to the concert hall. It can usually only be performed as the middle item in a program—otherwise the listeners will arrive later or leave early. This fact is symptomatic of a situation that could not have existed previously and its significance requires consideration. It

expresses the conflict between art as a 'religion of culture' on the one hand and art as a provocation by the modern artist on the other" (Gadamer, 1986).

In this sense, Grondin contends that when Gadamer refers to tradition, he does not do so in the way in which we usually perceive a traditionalist, which he is not, but rather thinking about the work of history that is being forged underneath tradition (Grondin, 2008). If we think in today's music, specifically in Opera, we must disagree. He himself asks in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* "why does the understanding of what art is today present a task for thinking?". However, he only dedicates a few pages of his two *Truth and Method* books, not mentioning his lectures and other books. In very few lines does Gadamer talk about music, and when he does so he deals with general questions and in a very vague way, such as when he speaks of time or rhythm (Gadamer, 1986) and when he finally discusses music with text he does so to legitimate urban or popular music, but without dedicating it specific exegesis, remaining in a position of intentional subjectivity that does not match the great hermeneutic task undertaken in other pages: "I would insist that the Threepenny Opera, or the records of modern songs so popular with the young people of today, are equally legitimate [as the Passion music of J. S. Bach]. They too have a capacity to establish communication in a way that reaches people of every class and educational background. I am not referring here to the contagious and intoxicated enthusiasm that is the object of mass psychology [...]. Yet it is surely significant that the younger generation feel that they express themselves spontaneously in the obsessive rhythms of modern music, or in very barren forms of abstract art" (Gadamer, 1986). From my point of view, these assertions place the philosopher among traditionalist prejudices that hinder his penetration into the authentic being that is unveiled in contemporary music.

For example, this moral guardianship regarding youngsters does not quite fit with the age of the people who go to see contemporary opera performances or of those who follow them on social media or download their digital content. Reflecting on and digging deeper into this is a task that we the researchers who deal with the nature of contemporary music are called upon to carry out.

### 3. Is It Possible to Speak of Truth in Contemporary Opera?

Under the heading "range of truth" I will focus on the following two theses:

- No-one can remain indifferent in the face of a work of art that subjects us to its truth (Grondin, 2008).
- The word "art" does not denote the concept of a mere happening. It is a concept of range. Art is not something found among other things, which one also performs and often enjoys. Art places the whole of existence in the decision and keeps it there, hence why it is itself placed under unique conditions (Molinuevo, 1998: p. 178)

As argued by Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, history, art and truth are the same in origin: the happening (history) of the being as the opening (truth) of the entity is art. This thesis is taken further by Gadamer in the first

part of *Truth and Method* when he posits that art contains and conveys truth. The legitimation of art therefore does not just lie in the aesthetic pleasure that it produces but also in its revelation of the being.

The work is never received—cannot be received—as it was conceived or created. It is clear that the composer conceived the work in the context of their world, which is not ours. And what makes a work “eternal” is certainly the fact that it adapts to the conditions of each time to say something to the spectator, because it answers the questions asked by the spectator.

No conductor would replace a D major chord with a C minor chord, and no singer would replace an instance of *Sprechgesang* with bel canto vocals. However, in contemporary direction we have characters in the scene without the libretto placing them there (for instance, the Princess of Eboli in Warlikowski’s *Don Carlo* stage at Opera Garnier in 2019) or Act 1 of Calisto Bieito’s *Un ballo in maschera* opening with the characters singing while sitting on the toilet at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in 2000). Such directions may alter the nature of the work but do not compromise its being, since the staging does not alter the message of the opera and is also aimed at an audience whose conditions of existence have substantially changed since the time in which it was conceived.

Thus, current direction can open up the work to truth by presenting a new interpretation of the conflicts inherited from the past—that which Gadamer considers to be “our tradition”, from which a fusion of horizons develops.

Let us take a hermeneutic look at two operas on the basis of contemporary instances of direction, which represent what is considered a new paradigm of opera. To do this, I will start with the specificity of Opera. While it is true that no work of art exists as something independent of its representation, scene direction in Opera is specifically not an autonomous creation, in contrast with that of a play. Instead, it constitutes mediated creation, since it is not disconnected from what the *libretto* says and what the music expresses. In this sense, it is formally subordinated to an objective that it cannot contradict. Its function is to take hold of one of the aforementioned planes of creation in order for the authentic reality of the work to emerge.

## 4. Staging and It’s Relationship with the Hermeneutic Truth of the Work

### 4.1. Example of Direction that Opens up the Understanding of the Hermeneutic Truth of the Work

*In the work, the struggle of truth is always reopened.* (Rebok, 2017: p. 255).

Some direction takes the audience to a logic of theatre that is different to the codes with which it was written, conceived and imagined. Thus it interrogatively opens up the truth of the work. This is the case with La Fura dels Baus’s version of **The Magic Flute**, whose staging incorporated great transformations: the original libretto was replaced by a long poem created based on it by Rafael Ar-gullol and recited through voice-over, and the dramatic action was moved to the protagonist’s brain (it was like in a Tamino’s dream): a non-physical space—the

imaginary inside of the protagonist's mind—and a time outside of time—an instant shorter a second. The floor symbolised the units of memory stored in the mind which also pointed to possible play between truth and fiction, as noted by those responsible for the staging. (Figure 1)

In this case, Àlex Ollé and Carlos Padrissa's direction brought light to what Mozart and Schikaneder had written. I am not speaking from the perspective of relevance or interest—an area more pertaining to critics—but from the sphere of hermeneutics itself and its capacity for opening up the true being of the work through *polemos*, so that the work thus regenerates its existence in the 21st century. In this sense, I share the hermeneutic theses that consider that interpreting directions consists in them being followed in accordance with their sense and not literally. These theses base themselves on the fact that a text is not a given object, but instead a phase in the realisation of a process of comprehending. (Figure 2)



**Figure 1.** *The magic flute* by Mozart, staged by Àlex Ollé and Carlos Padrissa. Stage Version by La Fura dels Baus and Jaume Plensa. © Wolfgang Silveri, La fura dels Baus.



**Figure 2.** *The magic flute* by Mozart, staged by Àlex Ollé and Carlos Padrissa. Stage Version by La Fura dels Baus and Jaume Plensa. © Wolfgang Silveri, La fura dels Baus.

## 4.2. Exemple of Direction that Veils Understanding of the Hermeneutic Truth of the Work

*All authentic art, not just avant-garde art, represents a challenge.* (Martel, 2015: p. 55)

However, what about direction that radically strays from the original sense and openly contradicts the *libretto*, preventing the audience from comprehending and thus penetrating the truth of the work?

This is the case of Andrea Breth's staging of **Lulu** in 2015 at Berlin's Staatsooper<sup>1</sup>. Breth overhauls Bertolt Brecht's dramaturgical conception of *Regietheater* according to which theatre is a non-affirmative reading of the world and must deploy philosophical, political and ideological mechanisms to open up a decentralisation of the reading of the text in order to comprehend the mechanisms that it implicitly carries. Brecht proposes a different reading of the text, one that evidences the alienation that society is subjected to at the hands of the dominant class, in the same vein as Adorno brings forward, albeit in a different way, in his *Minimum Moraliun* 22 "that culture produces the illusion of a society worthy of human beings, which does not exist". But Brecht never mentions vandalising the text to the point that understanding the meaning of the work becomes almost impossible. This is what Andrea Breth does. She has generated such a radical and independent narrative development that a neophyte spectator will not comprehend the truth of this work. In fact, they will not even glimpse its threshold. The original work contains many relationships that have disappeared in this staging: at structural level between the characters and some musical forms—i.e. Dr Schön is represented by the sonata and Lulu by the parlour music—and between characters and instruments—the athlete is symbolised by the piano, Alwa by the saxophone and the Marquis by the violin. Lulu's portrait, an essential element of the works on which the libretto is based and of the score, does not appear either. Thus when Lulu looks at herself in it (act I) or destroys it (act III) the audience cannot understand what is happening in the scene. Berg wanted the film that divides the opera into two parts to narrate Lulu and the Countess' stay in prison and in hospital. It, too, disappears, skipping to Scene 2 of Act 2 without giving the audience the necessary information to comprehend it. In summary, if direction problematises comprehension of a work to such a degree, the interpretation paradigm runs counter to the possibilities that the work would open up.

## 5. Conclusion

We do not intend to open the debate on the validity of beauty as constitutive of art, but we cannot omit reflections on what is beautiful in contemporary opera, re-assessing the Adornoian theses in light of what the 21st century has experienced musically. Contemporary opera is by no means foreign to this way of revealing the truth of what beauty is, and there are numerous examples. We refer

<sup>1</sup>*Lulu*. Staatskapelle Berlin. Daniel Barenboim conductor; staged by Andrea Breth. Deutsche Grammophon. DVD, 2015.

to the beauty that makes the instant significant: the thousands of LED light bulbs that, in the scenography of *L'amour de Loin* by Saariaho at the MET, symbolized the Mediterranean Sea; the symbolic play of lighting, choreography and chorus in *The First Emperor* by Tan Dun; or the wonderful colour construction of the stage in the innovative scenography of *Je suis narcissiste*, by Raquel García-Tomás, made by Marta Pazos at Teatro Real season 2019 in Madrid. We also refer to allegorical beauty, subjected to time, which goes to its essence to transcend it, in the most Hegelian sense of the term. If we take into account that beauty is one of the ways of presenting the truth as *unconcealment*, this happens in contemporary opera with a revelatory force, since it allows the artistic mediums involved to go much further than when they are presented separately. Robert LePage introduced circus, acrobatics, and digital media to opera; William Kentridge used puppets, drawings and animation; Àlex Ollé lighting and digital technologies; and Franc Aleu, robotics and virtual reality. All these approaches come from a rigorous conception of Opera, which broadens its horizons, those of art and, therefore, of ourselves.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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