

THÉÂTRE DU SOLEIL AND THE MUSIC OF JEAN-JACQUES LEMÊTRE

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SUMMARY. The contemporary performative scene is defined by the interaction of the means of artistic expression, which determines a permanent renewal of the scenic language. This article discusses the multiple stage practices that animate in the play the theater and music, in their complementarity or dynamic confrontation. These interactions are presented here from the perspective of the specific musical work of the artist Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, who facilitated a voice and movement rhythm workshop at the Faculty of Theater and Film of the Babeş-Bolyai University, March 2023. Unique figure in the theatrical musical landscape, he has been the musician, composer, luthier, and interpreter of the sound universe of the Théâtre du Soleil company's performances for more than forty years. This work aims to demonstrate that music for theater is a special genre born through the process of organic integration of the theatricality of the stage, by assuming the risk of being contaminated by the impurity generated by the actors' bodies that emit their own sound universe. The music for theater is enriched and energized by these experiences born from the osmosis of sound-enhanced image into organic and fruitful connections.

Keywords: music, theater, instruments, training, technique

Music and theater

Each theater performance has a distinct, unique sound identity. The sound universe of a show is defined by the combination and weight of the two specific components: the music and the ambient sound or jamming. Over time the music for theater has fulfilled various specific functions. At the beginning of the music for theater was a character in itself represented by the choir or later by a singer.

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The music for theater is usually not as developed as the music for film, although at this point the two influence each other inspirationally. In a theater performance, music can intervene at a precise moment imposed by the dramatic author or chosen by the director. There are performances in which the music introduces the specific atmosphere, invoking a certain physical or imaginary space. At other times it may overlap with actors entering and lighting changes. In performances where the dramatic structure is marked, the transition from one act to the next is accompanied by music. This ensures an organic continuity, camouflaging the decor changes made in plain sight. There are directors who use music at the end of the show, as a conclusion or to encourage the audience's applause.

Depending on the vision of the team making the show (usually the director, the set designer, the musician, and the playwright) the music can perfectly coincide with the era to which the dramatic text belongs, suggest, or elude it. The means of interpretative representation, the instruments, can significantly contribute to a historical reconstruction. The musical instruments used to make the music for theater and the way it is played (live or recorded, or a combination of the two) can give a special meaning to the message the show wants to convey, can emphasize a certain idea or feeling or perhaps highlight a scenic situation. Musical choices are directly determined by what is desired to be conveyed, and the result of these choices decisively influences the semiotics of the entire performance.

Music for theater can fulfill an illustrative function when it marks the entrance of a character, invokes a cultural-historical era, suggests the passage of time, illustrates a particular ambience (church, cabaret), induces a certain emotion, or overlaps the dramatic text.

Pure theatrical music existed in the ancient Greek theater but was lost. In Classicism, music for theater was rediscovered by Lully and Charpentier who, in collaboration with Moliere, rewrote and refunctionalized this special musical genre. Their model was later taken up by Maurice Jarre² and Jean Vilar³, Pierre Boulez⁴ with Jean-Louis Barrault⁵, and Kurt Weill⁶ who composed for Bertolt Brecht.

² Maurice-Alexis Jarre (13 September 1924 – 28 March 2009) was a French composer and conductor. Although he composed several concert works, Jarre is best known for his film scores.

³ Jean Vilar (25 March 1912– 28 May 1971) was a French actor and theater director.

⁴ Pierre Louis Joseph Boulez (26 March 1925 – 5 January 2016) was a French composer, conductor and writer, and the founder of several musical institutions. He was one of the dominant figures of post-war Western classical music.

⁵ Jean-Louis Bernard Barrault (8 September 1910 – 22 January 1994) was a French actor, director and mime artist who worked on both screen and stage.

⁶ Kurt Julian Weill (March 2, 1900 – April 3, 1950) was a German-born American composer active from the 1920s in his native country, and in his later years in the United States. He was a leading composer for the stage who was best known for his fruitful collaborations

From the perspective of this article, the most eloquent moment in the evolution of music for theater is that of the birth of Bertolt Brecht's epic theater. Brechtian songs have a decisive function in creating the distancing effect, *Verfremdungseffekt*. These couplets interspersed in the text and sung by different characters have a strong pamphlet, denunciation character. These musical moments must surprise, amaze, and move the viewer's attention away from the dramatic situation. They have the role of awakening the rational reaction of the viewer, of triggering a civic attitude on his part. This specific character works in accordance with the political and ethical-social theme of the Brechtian theater. This deeply militant and socio-political activism component also defines the creative work of the Théâtre du Soleil company and implicitly the music of Jean-Jacques Lemêtre.

Théâtre du Soleil, framework for the development of a new aesthetic of music for theater

The unitary and defining vision of the performances at the Théâtre du Soleil coagulated around the personality of Ariana Mnouchkine. A character in herself, she is defined by personal values such as civics and activism, which influenced her creative work to which she gave a strong critical character, questioning socio-political themes with local but also universal specificity, even relevant and determining historical events for the course of civilization. The artist denounced the myths and ironies of post-revolutionary French democracy, accused the inequalities of contemporary European society, in terms of race, social class and gender, and later analyzed the traumas and sufferings of those caught in the global human movement of conflict migration.⁷

Under the direction of Ariana Mnouchkine, Théâtre du Soleil becomes an active civic platform that assumes the role of an educator of the citizens and a carrier of their message. The audience of these traveling shows is activated just like in Brecht, stimulated to question, to judge, to have an attitude towards the progress of society, to build a political consciousness.

Such an approach also required a specific acting and directing technique, a technique that would allow the production team (a term Ariane replaces with that of ritual or ceremony, considering them more appropriate

with Bertolt Brecht. With Brecht, he developed productions such as his best-known work, *The Threepenny Opera*, which included the ballad "Mack the Knife".

⁷ Delgado, Maria M and Dan Rebellato, *Contemporary European Theater Directors* . Translated by Edith Negulici, Ramona Tănase and Loredana Voicila. Bucharest: Tracus Arte, 2016. p. 53

to illustrate the experience it generates) to create experiences designed to stimulate immediate responses and reactions from the audience. This type of work, which assumes an egalitarian status for the members of the creative team and explores improvisational techniques, coagulated in a technique that we call today *collective creation, collaborative* or *Devising, devised theater*. Building a cosmopolitan team of artists, Ariane diversified the theatrical technique by integrating their indigenous artistic traditions. Implicitly, all these innovations and novel approaches in theatrical art also influenced the way of creating music for theater.

Ariane approaches various themes from the French Revolution examined in the series of performances *1789*⁸, *1793*⁹, based on the *Commedia dell'Arte* technique, traversing the Shakespearean cycle, the translation of which is carried out by the director herself, exploring techniques of the oriental theater as an actor and culminating with the political performances built in collaborative technique.

The ritual experiences offered by the Théâtre du Soleil are true initiation journeys, they have a well-established route that starts on the path in the forest of Vincennes and takes the viewer to La Cartoucherie, a former armaments factory that has become the home of this theater company.

When we enter La Cartoucherie, there is an air of celebration, immediately perceptible. Troupe du Soleil welcomes every spectator paying attention to every detail. And it's no legend, Ariane Mnouchkine herself opens the doors of the theater every evening and honors her guests with undeniable attention. From the ticket office to the bookstore, passing through the great hall, from the ginger juice vendor to the lodges, from the seat reservation and bar, not forgetting the dramaturgical documentation, everything is designed to welcome people as "home".¹⁰

⁸ *1789 The revolution must stop at the perfection of happiness*, 1970 collective creation of the Théâtre du Soleil, direction by Ariane Mnouchkine, decor by Roberto Moscoso, costumes by Françoise Tournafond .

⁹ *1793 The revolutionary city is of this world*, 1972 collective creation of the Théâtre du Soleil, direction by Ariane Mnouchkine, decor by Roberto Moscoso, costumes by Françoise Tournafond.

¹⁰ Tackels, Bruno. *Ariane Mnouchkine and Théâtre du Soleil*. Translated by Eugenia Rotescu. Bucharest: NEMIRA, 2013.

Jean-Jeack Lemêtre and the sound universe of Théâtre du Soleil

One of the key points of this walking route is the workshop of Jean-Jacques Lemêtre. A fabulous space in a perfect order of chaos, a space that houses an impressive collection of instruments, some of them collected from around the world, others made by him. The collection that brings together more than 3000 instruments of the world is the fruit of the artist's searches throughout time and the globe in the anthropological research trips in which he accompanied Ariane Mnouchkine.

The instrument-making workshop opens a door to the sound universe of the Théâtre du Soleil, a universe that merges to the point of identification with the personality of Jean-Jacques Lemêtre. But how did he come to be a permanent and core member of this fabulous team? What is its origin and journey to the point it reached more than forty years ago in 1979?

Jean-Jacques Lemêtre says of him that he is of gypsy origin, the son of a *Breton Terre-Neuvas* and a *Gypsy*. Here, then, the maestro was born under the auspices of a mixed race that seemed to have predestined him to meet the cosmopolitan theater troupe at the Théâtre du Soleil.

He had his first encounters with music as a child, at the age of six, when he was part of the church choir of the cathedral in Angers. Church music gives him the opportunity to learn Gregorian chant. Then he begins the serious study of music, learning to play the clarinet and deepening notions of music theory. On the other hand, he is concerned with the cultural phenomenon from a historical and humanistic perspective. This knowledge base and self-taught spirit will substantially enrich his later musical creativity.

After finishing his studies, he initiates and leads a group in which he researches music therapy techniques. It also explores other artistic areas such as music recordings for theatre-radio, film music, analysis of early music.

He becomes a saxophonist in a jazz band with which he participates in a music festival in Amsterdam where he meets Gerard Hardy, one of the founding members of the Théâtre du Soleil. At that time the theater troupe was looking for a musician for a new creative project, and Hardy saw fit to propose to Jean-Jacques Lemêtre to consider a possible collaboration.

So, in 1979 Jean-Jacques Lemêtre meets Ariane Mnouchkine and they start collaborating to create music on the *Méphisto* project. Over the next six months he composes more than thirty original pieces of music, takes care of the specific training of the actor, and teaches the band members to play an instrument. He manages to build an organic, indissoluble link between music and stage speech. This is the debut of one of the most important artistic meetings in the world of performing arts.

The principles of music for theater creation: Scenophony (*scenophonie*)

Music for theater is constituted by combining the two main functions: the *noise function* and the musical, melodic function. In his creations, Jean-Jacques Lemêtre superimposes the two processes in an innovative way, thus inventing a new form of musical composition, specific to the theatrical stage process. Scénophonie is the term Jean-Jacques Lemêtre uses to define his specific musical theater art. The juxtaposition with the term scenography is obvious, from which it takes the role of creating a spatial illusion but enriches the meaning of the term with the musical content, that is, with the music composed for the theater. In this endeavor, the musician admits that he was inspired by the creative work of the Italian Renaissance scenographer Nicola Sabbatini ¹¹, who recorded his innovative principles and conceptions about the construction of machines for the creation of noise effects in the work *Practica di fabbricar scene et machines de théâtre*. This passion of Nicola Sabbatini for the invention of stage machines will turn Jean-Jacques Lemêtre into the passion for the construction of original musical instruments, which we will discuss in a dedicated section.

This creative principle of scenophony is evident in the performance *La nuit des Rois*¹² where the music marks the atmosphere of a precise space, the garden. The musician composed for this show several musical themes that make up the sound of the entire garden. And the space is completed by musical themes specially composed to build the sound of Olivia's house. These themes are played on instruments that imitate the sound of birds, on instruments made of clam shells and on Indian strings. The same function is performed by music in *Henry IV*¹³, where it creates the play space by describing a desert.

The music for theater composed by Jean-Jacques Lemêtre has a well-defined role of image manipulation through sound. In cinematography the sound engineer works with at least three recordings, the music, the background sound, and the voice, this helps him to create the perfect sound for the film. In the theater the image is complemented by sound. In a show

¹¹ Nicola Sabbatini (1574-1654) revolutionizes the art of scenography by inventing machines that create scenic effects designed to enhance the theatrical illusion.

¹² LES SHAKESPEARE LA NUIT DES ROIS 1982 Translation and mise en scène by Ariane Mnouchkine, decor by Guy-Claude François, masques by Erhard Stiefel, costumes by Jean-Claude Barriera and Nathalie Thomas, music by Jean-Jacques Lemêtre.

¹³ LES SHAKESPEARE HENRI IV 1984 Traduction et mise en scène d'Ariane Mnouchkine, decor by Guy-Claude François, masques by Erhard Stiefel, costumes by Jean-Claude Barriera and Nathalie Thomas, music by Jean-Jacques Lemêtre.

where the effect of wind is created with the help of visible fans, they have been equipped with speed changers so that the sound generated by them can be manipulated so that it is perfectly integrated into the dramaturgy and sound scenography.

The scenography is built from the empty space, this initial space that contains the versatility and poetic expression to be metamorphosed through the acting game accompanied by the sound that Jean-Jacques Lemêtre creates. Sound dramaturgy is a parallel story that complements and enriches the story performed on stage. Music for theater does not duplicate the story being played, it accompanies and amplifies it.

Musically, everything is thought out in such a way as to perfectly complement the metaphorical images specific to the performances at the Théâtre du Soleil. The performances open and close in a circular fashion with the music of Jean-Jacques Lemêtre. The entrance and exit from the ritualistic story of each show takes place, first, at the sound level. These musical moments, the overture and finale, are punctuated by an exhilarating rhythm that radiates and energizes actors and audience alike. An energy meant to break the spectator's connection with everyday space.

Being in the moment

Stage presence is one of the defining vectors that guides the stage creation of the troupe of actors from Théâtre du Soleil, coagulated around the personality of Ariana Mnouchkine. This determining requirement of presence in a permanent here and now is also embedded in the sound and musical means of Jean-Jacques Lemêtre.

Practically, the sound universe he creates is born from a complex labor process that begins with the actors' first rehearsal and ends with the last performance of the show. To compose the music of a show, Jean-Jacques Lemêtre actively participates in the rehearsal process of the troupe of actors. Thus, he composes, improvises, and performs in all stages of the show's creation and accompanies the actors' work with his music. To give organicity to his performative presence, he imaginatively associates an unseen character, or a less obvious one, but with a decisive role. He can embody the blood¹⁴ that circulates through the veins of the characters and the spectators, the sky, the earth, or historical time. These metaphorical presentations are enlivened by his live performance of his music, complemented by his direct presence on stage, on display. The artist's

¹⁴ Quillet, Jean-Marc. *Music & Theatre. La Musique de Jean-Jacques Lemêtre au Théâtre du Soleil*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013. p. 15

personal image is a theatrical sign in itself. His appearance, with white hair and beard, licked on his shoulders and chest, with slightly disproportionate hands made as if to encompass an entire orchestra, with a calm and radiant atmosphere, gives him a privileged status, always recognizable as the spirit of sound.

In the show *Les Naufragés*¹⁵ the consecrated space of the musician is integrated into the dramatic story. This is the first time this fabulous musician has been cast and given a dramatic character name, Camille Bérard, a name found in the character list. The space dedicated to the musician becomes a well-defined dramatic space, integrated into the directorial concept, with a clear function. Technically this construct works in a triangular scheme of communication, the director builds together with the actor, and the musician adjusts his sound concept according to what he hears and sees in the tuning of the former.

Research and creation of means of musical expression

The music completes the whole construction of the characters that have a characteristic and precise sound image, recognizable in every appearance. The music clarifies the emotional path of the actors, from the everyday emotion to the extra-daily emotion, but also the character's emotional path. Technically the instruments are tuned to the tonality of the voice and the rhythmic score is composed in accordance with the rhythm of the body. The music composed and performed directly in front of the audience at the edge of the stage is decisive for the rhythm of the performance. She is the very pulse of stage life.

In the process of building the character, the text will be spoken first without using the tonal accent of the word, only a certain length of the sound. The relationship between the actor's voice and the music is created at the level of rhythm and tonality. The rhythm of the language is mostly asymmetrical, the measures are not built symmetrically, just as in Gregorian music the bar is mostly redundant. The stringing of stressed and unstressed syllables of a text provides rhythmic cells upon which a template can then be built for future musical composition.

In the process of composing music, Jean-Jacques Lemêtre always starts from what the actors propose in their improvisations, that is why it is so necessary to be present at every stage of work on stage. Starting from

¹⁵ LES NAUFRAGÉS DU FOL ESPOIR (Aurores) 2010. A collective creation written by Hélène Cixous, based on a proposition by Ariane Mnouchkine, freely inspired by a mysterious posthumous novel by Jules Verne. Music by Jean-Jacques Lemêtre.

the proposals of the actors who describe a stage situation and assimilating the rhythm of the played text, the musician composes musical themes on the spot to define the characters, the stage situations, the atmosphere or the jamming sound. For the Shakespearean cycle the musician transformed the entire text (translated by Ariane into prose) into a musical phrase, thus the semicolon became percussion marks. The spectacularity of this process and the result is enhanced by the way the artist chooses his tools. There are two types of instruments he uses, the first is his impressive personal collection of instruments, and the second is that of the luthier who builds instruments adapted to the needs of the stage.

In his workshop there are more than 3000 instruments of which 800 are built by him. One such instrument is the archicistre built by ingeniously gluing a guitar with a medieval harp and lyre. Another instrument is la contrevache folle (The crazy Dou-Bull Bass), an instrument he created at the beginning of his career as a theater musician and which was born from a long process of researching instruments with a serious tonality.

When he composed the music for *Macbeth*,¹⁶ he started from a simple question: what is the music of evil, but of good ? Looking for these sounds he thought that they must not be recognizable and so he came to the conclusion that those sounds must be the sounds of the planets. He began researching the records archived by NASA and discovered that these sounds exist and are being recorded but they have a frequency that the human ear cannot perceive. He processed the sound with a mixer and moved it 27 octaves higher to hear it, so the sound of the planets is 27 octaves worse than what the human ear can perceive. Starting from this empirical research he composed music that he used to vibrate the walls of the theater, just like the power of evil that vibrates invisibly but which we feel. He built a sound to evoke the discomfort we feel in the presence of evil.

The musical body

The actor, through his live presence, creates an invaluable sound source on stage, a fact that inspired Jean-Jacques Lemêtre to build a specific training system for the exploration and diversification of acting means of vocal and bodily expression. The musical body is the very name of this system that the musician implements in workshops dedicated to rhythm, voice and movement.

¹⁶ MACBETH 2014. Based on William Shakespeare, translation and mise en scène by Ariane Mnouchkine, music by Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, costumes by Nathalie Thomas and Marie-Hélène Bouvet.

The meetings are precisely structured, following the same pattern: a preliminary discussion, warm-up exercises that he animates with the help of rhythms reminiscent of the overture to the performances at the Théâtre du Soleil, and ending with a heuristic conversation designed to fix the principles of the exercises in the actor's memory.

The master proposes a series of exercises aimed at awakening the actor's body and self-control, training the two muscles indispensable for stage work: the diaphragm muscle and the muscle of imagination. A series of exercises, such as posture exercises, are taken from the art of oriental actors. Other exercises aim to develop notions of rhythm through practical experiences. And other exercises have the merit of developing vocal qualities.

Importance is given to the assimilation of a working vocabulary that can allow fine-tuning and instant acting of the actor in character building work or in improvisational exercises. The rhythm exercises require the assimilation of three basic notions: dependence, interdependence, and independence. Addiction refers to the connection between body parts that perform the same movements, at the same rhythm. The interdependence of the limbs occurs when they have different movements, but at the same tempo. And independence is the hardest to achieve and requires each part of the body to do something different in terms of movement and tempo.

The notions that make up this specific vocabulary are in perfect agreement with Ariane Mnouchkine's conception of the actor's art and the purpose of the theater. The most important characteristic of acting is physicalizing, which the director and musician say is the only definition of theater: "*If it's not physical, it's not theater*"¹⁷ In the same section A Basic Rehearsal Vocabulary we find clear references to the complementary connection between music and acting: "*An actor must hear the music*"¹⁸, and especially the belief that a complete training of the actor incorporates notions of music: "*The stop (or halt): crucial for marking each state onstage, for creating a visual rhythm.*"¹⁹

Breathing is one of the most important components of musical body training. The body and the voice are linked by breathing, and this imposes a precise rhythm of the stage action. The rhythm of the voice is conditioned by the rhythm of the body. One of the hardest exercises is the one where the actors are asked to say a very simple sentence without moving their body. In the next phase the exercise is developed, and the actors are asked to say

¹⁷ Miller, Judith G. *Ariane Mnouchkine*. London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2007 . p. 134

¹⁸ *ibidem* p. 133

¹⁹ *ibidem* p. 134

the same phrase in three different body positions. The text must sound identical, be reproduced perfectly musically, rhythmically and in volume. Immediately the actor discovers that the resonance of the sound changes depending on the body position, which requires a fine-tuning of the head position and the sound emission. The first level is to choose body positions that allow the text to be addressed directly to the viewer, even to be looked into the eyes of a viewer. The exercise capitalizes on simpler listening exercises, because when we speak the text, we must pay attention to the reverberation it has in the concrete space of the room. We must train the ability to listen to the room, to feel the echo and to adjust the vocal emission according to the space. To be executed correctly, the exercise follows three distinct phases: the actor moves until he reaches the desired body position, fixes the position by not moving as in a photograph and says the sentence, the text.

The actor's musical training also includes a section dedicated to the articulate voice, i.e., speaking the text. In band technique one always differentiates between the voice of the actor, the voice of the mask and the voice of the character. It is well known that actors from Théâtre du Soleil have a particular way of speaking the text on stage. This pattern is the result of several factors, first the band is a cosmopolitan band which provides the premises for a change in the accent of the French language. These different musicality's of the language are explored through the proposed exercises. In the voice workshop Jean-Jacques Lemêtre talks about the mistake of reciting text by taking over a musicality imposed by scholastic study. He believes that we must start in the vocal exploration of the text from the state of neutrality, with a musicality of the language as neutral as possible. In the practical workshop he distinguishes between three levels of speaking the text, the neutral level, which he calls diction, the accented level of speech, which he calls articulation, and the third level, which he calls interpretation of the text. For the level of interpretation of the text there are different approaches, a director may ask the actor not to interpret the text theatrically, but musically. All these ways of approaching the text involve different vocal techniques that the actor must master and learn with the help of practical exercises.

Musical body training includes exercises for imagining and creating space. The actor starts his stage work from the empty space which he transforms through movement and sound. The space construction exercises are performed in a circular way emphasizing the entry and exit from the space.

Conclusions

Jean-Jacques Lemêtre marked the evolution of music for theater in the last forty years through his work. His collaboration with Ariane Mnouchkine gave rise to a new technique of music for theater composition. This method of composing music for theater is the most important moment in this field since Brecht.

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