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# Im Hörraum vor der Schaubühne

Theatersound von Hans Peter Kuhn  
für Robert Wilson und  
von Leigh Landy für Heiner Müller

**[transcript]** Theater

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**Dokument: “Spar deinem Schiff  
die unbequeme Fracht, Den Mißlaut  
meiner Schmerzen deinem Ohr.”**

A Composer's Work with *Philoktet* (February 1987)

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LEIGH LANDY<sup>1</sup>

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- 1 Das Müller-Zitat im Titel lautet ins Englische übersetzt etwa: “Save your ship of this inconvenient freight, the discord of my pain to your ear”. Dieser Text ist ein historisches Dokument: Der Text von 1987 ist als Typoskript mit handschriftlichen Änderungen von Leigh Landy im Heiner-Müller-Archiv, Nr. 7775, der Akademie der Künste Berlin erhalten. Landy verfasste ihn im Februar 1987 für den Abdruck im Magazin *Neues vom Basler Theater*, Jg. 3 (1985/87) oder 4 (1987/88). Er ist weder darin noch im nächsten Jahrgang des Folgemagazins *Neues vom Theater Basel* (1988) erschienen. Wahrscheinlich ist dies die Erstveröffentlichung des vollständigen Texts. Auszüge wurden publiziert in: Leigh Landy, “How often have you seen your compositions performed? A plea for more audio-visual collaborations in experimental music”, in: *Interface* 17, 4 (Januar 1988), S. 241–249. Der Originaltext ist für eine Übersetzung ins Deutsche geschrieben worden, weshalb einige Begriffe im englischen Original auf Deutsch sind. An diesen Stellen wurde der deutsche Begriff durch das englische Äquivalent ersetzt. Gedankt sei Liisa Lanzrein für die Recherche in Basel.



### The problem: music in today's theatre

There is an anecdote which circulates among composers in the BRD (West Germany) which goes: the experimental composer, Gottfried von Einem ["of one"], could never make music for the theatre. If he were to do so, he'd have to change his name to 'von Allem' ["of all"]. This joke is painful in two senses: first of all it shows how it is expected of the theatre composer that he writes like a chameleon changing colour constantly, a 'jack of all trades'; further it shows how the theatre composer often must adjust his standards to the wishes of his almighty director. Many of Hollywood's composers are no different.

It is clear that the role of the composer in spoken theatre does not necessarily have to be a major one; ironically when it does become one, most people immediately think of opera. My interest and the interest of a few (far too few) of my compatriots is not that of an opera composer, not that of a 'theatre composer', the von Allem, but instead that of a music-dramaturge, someone who attempts to integrate music as one of the main characters in a play of a given dramatic performance. Must music in spoken theatre be used just for décor changes, as a form of atmosphere or what today is known as general noise, or, even worse, as background music?

### In casu Heiner Müller

Heiner Müller, for as far is known, has not been overly interested in active audio-visual collaborations. The only time that music was immediately made and integrated into a Müller work was with Paul Dessau in *Zement*.<sup>2</sup> According to Müller, Dessau did not reach a Müller opus 2, finding Müller's texts musical enough as they were. Nevertheless, Müller considers this opinion to be exaggerated; he leaves room for music within his works, while giving little to no specific musical or sound instructions. (He once told me in a typical late-night nihilist mood that the true theatre composer was he, who does not let the bells toll when the text calls for them.)

It is only recently, beginning with the Cologne version of *CIVIL warS*, that Müller has (re)discovered this sort of collaboration. But as Wilson's

2 Heiner Müller, *Zement*, Uraufführung am Berliner Ensemble 1973 mit Musik von Paul Dessau und Regie von Ruth Berghaus.

images make no sound, they don't (overly) interfere with Müller's powerful texts. Music, on the other hand, ...

To be honest, after several experiences with various Müller texts, the theatre music problem has not yet completely been solved. Including this *Philoktet* production, I have now worked on his texts six times: three times outside of the theatre – a song cycle (*Müller-Lieder*), a radiophonic piece (*No Water Music*) and a dramatic musical work (*B*, a reduction of *Bildbeschreibung*), all of musical length (i. e., less than 30 minutes each). I have also participated in three Müller theatre productions: the première of *Bildbeschreibung* (*Description of a Picture*, Graz, director: Ginka Tscholakowa), *Quartett* (Cologne) and *Philoktet* (*Philoctetes*, Basle, both directed by Dimiter Gotscheff). The primary difference between the two groups is that when writing a more music-oriented work, the composer is his own director in a sense (with the exception of opera, of course). This is also a possibility when the composer collaborates directly with a writer in creating a new work in which the music is integrated. The question is, when desired, how to achieve a similar amount of room for manoeuvre when making new productions of existent theatre works? Directors tending to look for "von Allem" should not approach me as my interest is in the collaborative process as opposed to the musician in service of the almighty director. What interests me – and how this *Philoktet* staging was approached – is the subject of the following.

### Theatre as an audio-visual genre

Artaud once wrote "The idea is to feed, furnish and let the space speak for itself". This quote is of particular interest to the composer of new music for the theatre.

How might we sonorously furnish the theatrical space? Those acquainted with important advances in recent experimental music, are aware of the evolution of music which earlier (only) consisted of notes and now includes all sounds, as well as the liberation of the spatial dimensions in music (in terms of stereo and quadrophonic recordings, of spatially placed musicians and loudspeakers in live performance). These two developments within the musical area combined with Artaud's plea lead to an interesting potential starting-point for today's composer working in the theatre. In fact, the "von Allem" joke isn't all that irrelevant when one considers the



potential sources of sound one can employ within a composition, including theatre works: all instruments found throughout the world, new vocal techniques – this is of special interest when the composer can work with the actors' speech and singing techniques – and all sounds recordable via the microphone or produced electronically. The challenge is to assimilate sound sources not usually combined and diverse styles that are compatible with a given dramatic situation.

In other words a comparison is à propos: if one were to call Robert Wilson's theatre, *le théâtre d'images*, does a *théâtre sonore* exist and is it in fact a potential partner of Wilson's theatre of images and Müller's theatre of the spoken word? The only solution to this question comes through an approach to music as the 'organization of sounds' (Varèse's definition of music), through working constantly in collaboration with the direction team and with the actors as far as the ear-portion of theatre is concerned. This type of work is not of interest for today's Bachs and Mozarts who compose à la minute as this type of collaboration, at least in terms of my experiences, is tedious and slow. To illustrate this approach, a short description of the work process in this staging of *Philoktet* follows.

### In casu *Philoktet*

When reading the title of the current text – the couplet has been taken from Müller's *Philoktet* – one wonders whether Paul Dessau perhaps was right in finding the texts to possess their own musicality. (In fact more composers than ever are treating Müller texts: Wolfgang Rihm, for example, won the 1986 Rolf-Liebermann-Preis for his opera based on Müller's *Hamletmaschine*.<sup>3</sup>)

In the case of the Basle *Philoktet*, three quotations will lead to the description of the sonorous furnishing of the space. The first concerns a potential compositional approach called for by an unexpected spokesman; the second and third allude to potential sound-sources for our production.

Heiner Müller: "Zunächst gibt es einen Grundirrtum: Literaturgeschichte und Kunstgeschichte wird in den Medien immer erst einmal als eine Geschichte von Inhalten oder Bearbeitungen von Inhalten verstanden und interpretiert [...]. Es

3 Wolfgang Rihm, *Die Hamlet-Maschine*, Musiktheater in fünf Teilen (1983–86).

wird überhaupt nicht transportiert, daß es ein formulierter Text ist und daß die Formulierung eines Tatbestandes schon die Überwindung eines Tatbestandes ist. Das utopische Moment liegt in der Form".<sup>4</sup>

John Cage: "Music is all around us, if only we had ears. There would be no use of concert halls, if man could only learn to enjoy the sounds which envelope him."<sup>5</sup>

William Shakespeare (*The Tempest*): "Be not afraid – This isle is full of noises".

Müller has written something which has always been true of serious music (E-Musik) and is often forgotten by its appreciators. Of course music is more abstract; the point he makes within literature is more poignant. Nevertheless, this particular quotation led me to reread *Philoktet* as I would read a Bartók score. Imagine my surprise when after a somewhat superficial analysis a sonata form with few exceptions was generated! In short, the form's most basic elements are: *Theme 1*: The begin dialogue between Odysseus and Neoptolemos; *Theme 2*: The confrontation between Philoktet and Neoptolemos; the *development*: The beginning of the triad-discussion before Müller's called-for pause. A *third theme*, which I call the "Trojan War theme", takes place directly after the pause leading to Philoktet's death, at which point the *recapitulation* begins. The most visual *coda* of the Basle production completes the sonata.

The third theme within sonata form was first employed by Beethoven – alas, he placed it where it should be, namely before the development. I'm sure Müller won't lose any sleep due to his "mistake". Wagner often

4 "First, there is a fundamental error: in the media the initial interpretation of history of literature and art history is based on a focus on content or the adaptation of content [...]. One does not communicate that these are formulated texts and that the verbal/textual expression of the object in question is already the overcoming of those state of affairs. The utopian moment is in the form." Translation into English: Leigh Landy. German original in: Heiner Müller, "Gespräch mit Wittstock", in: ders., *Gesammelte Irrtümer. Interviews und Gespräche* Bd. 1, Frankfurt/Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1986, S. 180.

5 Nachgewiesen werden konnte das Zitat nur als Paraphrase John Cages durch Joseph Byrd im Kommentar zu der Schallplatte: John Cage, assisted by David Tudor, *Variations IV, Volume II*, Everest 3230 (1964?).



claimed that a few of his later operas contained sonata forms stretched out over the span of several hours. The modern composer of the Basle *Philoktet* hasn't composed a sonata since his early compositional studies, leaving it to history. Through Müller an exception was made.

The filling in of most of the themes brings us to the other quotations in combination with the direction team's desire to offer the theatre as Philoktet's island. Most sounds in this production can be found in any theatre, but are ignored. Often these sounds combine elegantly with that which takes place on stage, 'if one would only listen ...'. As sound is temporal, special care was taken in the choice of continuous elements<sup>6</sup> which must harmonize with the activities of the actors, and shorter, discrete elements,<sup>7</sup> which 'interrupt' the time-continuity.

Another form of interruption was choreographed in collaboration with [Mitko] Gotscheff,<sup>8</sup> namely the points when the Müller text is interrupted or repeated. One might speak of potential surrealist moments including the break in activity which is supposed to be the pause (another non-sonata form element). The chosen melody that is sung and whistled from time to time exemplifies such an interruption (a Swiss soldier's tune) fulfilling Müller's desire that allusion be made to the "Kriegsgeschichte, vom Trojanischen bis zum Japanischen Krieg" (*history of war, from the Trojan to the Japanese War*).<sup>9</sup> Finally, a good deal of time was spent at rehearsals focusing on the development of the vocal timbres unique to Müller's Lemnos.<sup>10</sup>

My "Mißlaut" (discord) is the furnishing of sounds which feed the theatre-island in sonata form.

6 Leigh Landy erinnert diese andauernden Klänge als elektronisch.

7 Wie im Text beschrieben.

8 Heiner Müller, *Philoktet*, Regie: Dimiter Gotscheff, Basel, Uraufführung am 20.3.1987.

9 "Zum Schlußgesang von Odysseus und Neoptolemos mit dem toten Philoktet können Bilder aus der Kriegsgeschichte projiziert werden, vom Trojanischen bis zum Japanischen Krieg." Heiner Müller, *Philoktet*, Anmerkung 2.

10 Lemnos ist die Insel, auf der *Philoktet* spielt.