

## PETER KONWITSCHNY'S MUSICOLOGICALLY ERUDITE OPERA DIRECTION

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**Abstract:** Besides the left-wing commitment of their ideological interpretations, the productions of the German director Peter Konwitschny are characterized by the appearance of some recognizable, constantly occurring signs which have acquired the semantic meaning of isotopies during the almost four decades of his opera directing activities. In this study, the author focuses on the procedures typical of the director's work, which are directly derived from the musical material of the staged scores. On the example of some selected productions, she demonstrates that, although Konwitschny often interprets operas in the context of their staging tradition provocatively, his musicological erudition enhances the ideological and aesthetic values of his directorial argumentation.

**Keywords:** Peter Konwitschny, opera theatre, opera score, musical symbols, ballet music

As the son of the prominent conductor Franz Konwitschny and the opera singer Anny Konwitschny, Peter Konwitschny was surrounded with music from his early childhood. Initially, he also wanted to become a conductor, but he was not admitted because he failed in sight-reading, which was a primary condition for studying conducting. He began to study physics at Humboldt University in Berlin but left after less than a year. When he again failed to gain admission to conducting, he applied for opera direction at the Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eichler in Berlin (1965–1970). The syllabus contained a wide range of music theory subjects, which he mastered with the best possible grades, except for a B from harmony.

At the time of Peter Konwitschny's studies in Berlin, the leading figure of German, and even European, opera theatre was Walter Felsenstein. As a spectator, Konwitschny became familiar with his work at Komische Oper<sup>1</sup>, partly through his teacher, the head of the direction department, Hans-Jochen Irmer. The influence of Felsenstein's psychological realism on the opera theatre poetics of Peter Konwitschny is obvious mainly from his orientation on singing actors. For an opera production to gain genuine emotionality and authenticity, the singers must perfectly internalize the dramaturgical motivations of the characters, and these must become their own personal motivations.

Just like Walter Felsenstein, Peter Konwitschny also derived the psychology of the characters and their dramatic motivations primarily from the music. His productions are based on his detailed knowledge of the opera scores, and this enhances the value of his theatre concepts, which are often very unconventional or downright provoca-

<sup>1</sup> Walter Felsenstein established a progressive opera stage in 1947, which he headed as its intendant until his death in 1975.

tive. This aspect was pointed out also by the Slovak musicologist Vladimír Zvara, the dramaturge of several Konwitschny productions, most of them in the Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava: "While several other directors base their understanding of a work mainly on their analysis of the libretto, for Peter Konwitschny, music plays an equally important role. To a large extent, the exceptionality of his directorial work rests on his ability to listen to the music. (...) Very often, music reveals, interprets, or even contradicts, the scenic action, so a true statement of the work is actually born out of the interplay and tension between the text, the music, and the action on stage. Peter Konwitschny listens to the music carefully from the first bar of the overture onwards; he scrutinizes what is being said 'between the lines', which character on the stage it lends its voice to, whom it supports, or whom it convicts of hypocrisy. His in-depth analysis of the score, combined with his unfettered theatrical imagination, lends a solid foundation and convinciveness to his directorial ideas."<sup>2</sup>

### Critical Score-Reading

Peter Konwitschny's productions are rich in irritating moments, which prevent the audience from comfortably enjoying an aesthetic experience: fighting against culinary opera<sup>3</sup> is an essential feature of his directorial poetics. Thanks to his rigorous musical analysis of the works, at times he allows himself to be merciless, when he clear-sightedly exposes and utilizes the weaknesses of the score, and the places calculated for effect, in favour of his theatrical concepts. In staging Jacques Fromental Halévy's grand opera *La Juive* (première of the concept of the Vlaamse Opera, Antwerpen/Ghent, 2015), for example, the choir, scattered around the auditorium and waving paper flags among the audience, laughed at the *De ces nobles guerriers* quartet of Rachel, Éléazar, Léopold, and Ruggiero, which was taking place in a grotesque acting hyperbole on the stage. Peter Konwitschny underpinned this staging solution, which must have made several spectators uncomfortable, with musically apt arguments. In the above quartet, Jacques Fromental Halévy composed light, at some instances even operetta-like banal music<sup>4</sup>, which the director readily utilized for the described alienating moment.

In a similar way, in staging Giuseppe Verdi's early opera *Attila* (Theater an der Wien, 2013), Peter Konwitschny did not miss any passage clichéd in the plot or schematic in the music, which could be visually illustrated. With the argument that his theatre aesthetics "corresponds to whatever is overexposed, naive, and youthful in the music,"<sup>5</sup> he placed Act One in a playground: "Music lends structure to the staging. Since it sounds so carefree, in the first part we introduce the characters as children.

<sup>2</sup> ZVARA, V. Hudobné divadlo Petra Konwitschného [The Opera Theatre of Peter Konwitschny]. In *Piotr Iljič Čajkovskij: Eugen Onegin*. [Programme booklet]. Bratislava : Slovenské národné divadlo, 2004, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> The term was introduced by the members of the Frankfurt School, headed by Theodor W. Adorno, to denote opera art that wants to be primarily savoured.

<sup>4</sup> In a pre-première interview, the conductor of its Bratislava staging, Robert Jindra, noted that "maybe it was Halévy's idea to also emphasize the cynical aspect of the whole tragic plot." See JINDRA, R. – KMEČOVÁ, V. Halévyho Židovka ako predzvest' Gesamtkunstwerku [Halévy's *La Juive* as a Forerunner of Gesamtkunstwerk]. [Interview]. In *Operaslovakia.sk*, 6 July 2017. [online]. [cit. 21 May 2022]. Available at: <http://operaslovakia.sk/robert-jindra-halevyho-zidovka-ako-predzvest-gesamtkunstwerku/>.

<sup>5</sup> KONWITSCHNY, P. – BARTZ, B. – LEIACKER, J. Giuseppe Verdi. *Attila*. [Interview]. In *Giuseppe Verdi: Attila*. [Programme booklet]. Wien : Theater an der Wien, 2013, p. 16.



Jacques Fromental Halévy: *La Juive*. Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 7 April 2017. Photo by Alena Klenková. Slovak National Theatre archives.

The rhythm and the melody characterize the Huns as non-adults and immature, as an irresponsible hoard of hooligans rattling their weapons.”<sup>6</sup> The musical motifs of Scene Two, which begins with an orchestral storm, were accompanied by fairy-tale-like, overexposed, colourful lightnings and mist. Peter Konwitschny regarded the Chorus of Hermits as an absurdity in itself (after all, hermits do not live in communities) and as a manifestation of Giuseppe Verdi’s sense of humour. In the spirit of this belief, he presented them as visually comical figures with long fake beards made of knitting wool, admiring paper boats floating across the proscenium. Even Foresto, a Tribune of Aquileia, did not escape the irony: with a paper military cap on his head, he whimpered in the bitter aria *Ella in poter del barbaro* for his fiancée Odabella, seized from him by Attila. Because of his misery, he wanted to hang himself from a model tree, but it collapsed under him. During Odabella’s virtuoso weeping for her dead father (the aria *Oh! Nel fuggente nuvolo*), whose mood was depicted by the subtle solo instrumentation of the flute, the cor anglais, and the cello, plastic birds flew down to Odabella and the soprano imitated the harp accompaniment of the aria with gestures on a guitar made of cardboard.

However, even with several grotesque mise-en-scènes, Peter Konwitschny’s *Attila* was not a single-string persiflage. The more comical the illustrative inserts and recessist scenes were, the more intense the contrastingly conceived locations sounded, which the director took very seriously. A twist in the staging occurred when

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 15.



Giuseppe Verdi: *Attila*. Theater an der Wien, premiered on 7 July 2013. Dmitry Belosselskiy (Attila), Stefan Cerny (Leone). Photo by Monika Rittershaus. Theater an der Wien archives.

Pope Leo I announced to Attila that he would never manage to enter the holy city of Rome. According to Peter Konwitschny, “this is the most beautiful music in the opera, it gets under your skin because an ethical objection is raised here by a higher power.”<sup>7</sup> For the heroes of his staging, this plot twist meant the end of their childhood. The final battle between the representatives of hostile worlds took place in a nursing home, in wheelchairs and rollators. Odabella was not able to carry out the revenge for which she had been gathering courage throughout the opera because she could not reach the lying Attila from her wheelchair. With the last tones of the opera, all the elders died a natural death, only Odabella was flailing a knife into the void like a metronome.

From the musicological aspect, one of Peter Konwitschny’s most sophisticated concepts is his staging of Alban Berg’s opera *Lulu*, born of the director’s long-standing congenial collaboration with the conductor Ingo Metzmacher (Staatsoper Hamburg, 2003). The theatre makers did not use the version completed in 1962–1974 by the Austrian composer Friedrich Cerha, which is the preferred one in performance practice, but the original two-act fragment with a prologue and without Act Three. That is, the opera as Alban Berg had managed to compose it before he suddenly died of blood poisoning in 1935. Before the prologue of the opera, they inserted a pantomime scene with the music of the *Adagio* of Alban Berg’s concert piece *Lulu-Suite* – in his analytical study, the German musicologist Peter Petersen called this part of

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

the production a “new prologue.”<sup>8</sup> In this, a surrealistic dream scene of the murder of Lulu took place, which chronologically belongs to Act Three, non-existent in this version. The same music was used by the theatre makers at the end of the staged fragment as a “new epilogue.”<sup>9</sup>

The directorial treatment of the interlude between the two scenes of Act Two, where the composer placed a palindrome, a mirroring turning point from which the score unfolds in reverse, was highly original. Peter Konwitschny staged the interlude in the sense of the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, literally visualizing Alban Berg’s music. As the interlude began, a semi-transparent curtain slid down on the proscenium and an elderly couple rose from two chairs in the auditorium. Loudly indignant at the happenings on the stage, they left the hall and, in a few moments, appeared on the stage. A cloakroom was projected onto the curtain, with the attendant handing them their coats. The lady kept raging passionately until her disgusted husband theatrically stabbed her in the back with a huge fake knife. A large speech bubble with the words of the cloakroom attendant was projected onto the screen: “Leaving already?” And from there, from the place marked in the score as a palindrome, the whole scene was played out in reverse: the couple reversed from the stage and returned to their seats in the auditorium with their original grumble. This musicologically sanctified solution became a connoisseur’s theatre gag, one of the most felicitous ones in Konwitschny’s directorial oeuvre. As Petersen noted in his already cited study: “As always with Peter Konwitschny, in creating the characters and the action on stage, music is decisive above all.”<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to the common tradition of staging the version of the opera completed by Friedrich Cerha, in Peter Konwitschny’s Hamburg staging, Lulu does not die. The director let her “leave the world of men and women obsessed with sex,” who made her a prostitute and did not give her anything positive, only with the “sorrow from so many failed attempts to find love, expressed in the music.”<sup>11</sup> Her greatest love, and greatest disappointment, was the composer Alwa, whom the producers identified as the composer of the opera, Alban Berg. When Lulu left him with a farewell kiss, a poster with the following text appeared on the stage: “An exciting opera could be composed about this.” Alwa put on his coat, draped his bohemian white scarf over, and left the stage without any effort to save his relationship with Lulu or Lulu herself. According to Peter Konwitschny, “the binding constructions of Berg’s dodecaphonic and serial techniques are nothing more than a means to protect oneself from that which is too alive and too unpredictable. For men, it is about getting fear under control – the creator of the construction always has the upper hand over his structure.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> PETERSEN, P. Lulu geht. Anmerkungen zu Peter Konwitschnys zweitem Berg-Projekt (Hamburg 2003). In *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 2015, Vol. 72, Issue 3, p. 221.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>12</sup> KONWITSCHNY, P. – BARTZ, B. Die Reeperbahn spielt mit. [Interview]. In *Alban Berg: Lulu*. [Programme booklet]. Cited from WELKER, A. (ed.). *Peter Konwitschny. „Mensch, Mensch, Mensch!“ Oper als Zentrum der Gegenwart*. Weitra : Verlag Bibliothek der Provinz, 2015, p. 356.



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: *Eugene Onegin*. Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 16 September 2005. Ľudovít Ľudha (Lensky), Pavol Remenár (Eugene Onegin). Photo by Alena Klenková. Slovak National Theatre archives.

### (Non-)ballet Items

“Polonaise music is too good for remaining a ballet insert... (...) When we realize that Onegin has just killed a person, who was his friend, it takes on a completely different meaning for us.” Behind this quote, which comes from a text written by transcribing the working conversations of the producers and was published in the programme booklet of *Eugene Onegin* in the Slovak National Theatre (2005<sup>13</sup>), stands one of the fundamental theses of Peter Konwitschny’s poetics: The music of an opera must not be degraded in its staging to the illustration of pretty scenes. Consequently, even the ballet items, which are often part of opera scores, never become a source of non-conflicting aesthetic pleasure in his stagings. In *Eugene Onegin*, a polonaise opens Scene Six, in which the titular hero returns from his journey, where he sought an escape from remorse and social condemnation, and bursts straight into a ball “like Chatsky” in the house of Prince Gremin. Scene Six is usually divided from Scene Five, when Onegin kills his friend Lensky in an unfortunate duel, by a break or at least a curtain, since several months pass between these events. Since Peter Konwitschny violated this dramaturgical division (and the score did not prevent him from doing so

<sup>13</sup> The première of the original conception of the work, Oper Leipzig, 1995.

in any way), this effective but, in the dramatic arc of the plot, not really essential item received a novel, emotionally shocking dimension. Instead of an aristocratic dance, he staged a dramatic *mise-en-scène*, in which a half-mad Onegin tried to dance with the body of his dead friend in a frenetic rhythm. The opera critic Radmila Hrdinová called this scene a “Strindbergian drama between a dead and a living friend” (...), “instead of a ballroom idyll, what appears is Onegin’s existential confrontation with death.”<sup>14</sup> Without Onegin leaving the stage, this is immediately followed by his final confrontation with life – with Tatyana married to Prince Gremin.

In the production of another Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky opera, *Pikovaya Dama* (Oper Graz, 2011), Peter Konwitschny also radically intervened in the ballet scene taking place at the Countess’s masquerade ball. Herman shattered the seeming idyll of the carefree cream of society enjoying themselves at a tableau of the virtuous shepherdess in *Daphnis and Chloe*. He unexpectedly entered the dance music, which was retarding the plot from the musical and the dramaturgical aspect, with an inserted drama text, which he furiously rendered in German, the native language of the majority of the audience, in the illuminated auditorium: “You guys must be out of your mind with your bullshit, making such stupid music here! Tchaikovsky had to add the virtuous shepherdess here because the St. Petersburg institute forced him to! So that those damn St. Petersburg opera goers would move their asses to the opera. Do you have any idea about what theatre is?!”

In Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida* (Oper Graz, 1994), at the time when this very controversially received, now iconic staging was born, Peter Konwitschny again cancelled all the dance items that the traditional, narrative versions of the work tend to flaunt. His concept grasped the story with ascetic scenic means as a chamber drama of solo characters, without the participation of a choir or a ballet. In Act Two, instead of a spectacular parade of victorious troops and venerable priests, a decadent private party took place of Ramfis, the King of Egypt, and Amneris, heavily watered with alcohol. The return of Radames was not a victorious triumph, either – the dirty man with a torn stuffed elephant under his arm did not even resemble a war hero.

Just like the *Marcia trionfale* [Triumphal March] in *Aida*, the *Tanz der sieben Schleier* [Dance of the Seven Veils] in Richard Strauss’s *Salome* is an orchestral piece that offers attractive scope for the art of dance. In this case, Peter Konwitschny (Dutch National Opera Amsterdam, 2009) did not completely reject dance in his staging, but just like in *Eugene Onegin*, gave it the value of an ideological punchline. Suffocating in a claustrophobically closed bunker with her perverted parents and their no better courtiers, Salome made everyone present dance wildly to the first notes of intoxicating music. It seemed it would be a choreographically primitive piece, although still a dance item. However, her wild energy did not last long, and her mad, rambunctious emotion suddenly changed into utter despair: she drew doors sadly on hermetically sealed walls with a chalk and then tried in vain to open or kick them out. Other characters followed her in these attempts, all wanting to get out of this dystopian prison. By the end of the scene, they realized that their actions were absurdly hopeless, and resignedly returned to the table, only to end up in a group fight.

<sup>14</sup> HRDINOVÁ, Radmila. Opera – báječné nedorozumění? (dva měsíce s operou v Lipsku) [Opera – A Charming Misunderstanding? (Two Months with the Opera in Leipzig)]. In *Svět a divadlo*, 1995, Vol. 6, Issue 3, pp. 126.



Another iconic scene in Peter Konwitschny's oeuvre is the dream of Princess Eboli from his staging of Giuseppe Verdi's *Don Carlos*<sup>15</sup> – a pantomime scene with which the director filled the ballet item in the French version of the opera. In stark visual contrast with the production's previous minimalist scenography and its historicizing costume design, he conceived a scene from the everyday life of the contemporary upper middle class. In a hyper-realistic flat, in a living room with a fireplace, a pregnant Eboli was setting the table while dancing with a baking tray with a turkey. The bell rang and Don Carlos entered the room in a light trench coat, holding a briefcase. His wife curled up to him seductively, took off his coat and massaged his legs, although it was difficult for her to move with her big belly. Then they dressed up (she took off her apron, which concealed a beautiful maternity dress, and she put on him a short velvet robe instead of his jacket) and danced merrily across the room together, ending with comical ballet leaps. Suddenly, smoke wafted into the living room from the kitchen: Eboli burnt the Peter roasting turkey. In the meantime, the guests arrived – his father Philip and his stepmother Elisabeth. A delivery boy (representing Rodrigo Posa) brought a pizza from Posa's pizzeria, which Carlos had ordered instead of the burnt turkey. The parents and the children ate, drank, and danced together, and family idyll reigned over the room. When Eboli's labour contractions began, the men assembled a crib and Elisabeth gave the bride a teddy. While the stage went dark again to be immediately replaced by sterile backdrops, where the entire staging took place with the exception of this dream scene, the celebration ended with laughter and champagne spraying. At least this way, in a dream utopia, Peter Konwitschny granted Eboli the fulfilment of her desire for the love of Don Carlos and for the peace of the family hearth.

### Music on Stage

One of Peter Konwitschny's signature features is musical instruments placed on the stage in the role of symbols. In *Eugene Onegin*, (Oper Leipzig, 1995), the opening scene began on an almost empty stage. In the company of chairs reminiscent of a waiting room at a railway station from which no trains depart and a stump of a dead birch without its roots which – in the words of Radmila Hrdinová – evoked a “mutilated wreck of a Russian idyll,”<sup>16</sup> stood the harp, which accompanies the first part of the song of Tatyana and Olga, *Slyhali l' vy* in the score. However, the player left the instrument during the duet, so in the further course of the production, it served only as an occasional hanger for Onegin's coat and symbolized, on an ideological level, “the sign of bygone Orphean times.”<sup>17</sup>

A more important scenic role than that of the harpist in *Eugene Onegin* was played by the violinist in the staging of Leoš Janáček's opera *Jenůfa* (Oper Graz, 2014). Janáček composed a beautiful dialogue of the soprano and a solo violin for the scene in which

<sup>15</sup> The production was originally premièred at the Staatsoper Hamburg (2001) but, in the context of European opera theatre, it was its remake at the Wiener Staatsoper (2004) that resonated more. This production also had long stage life; it was still performed in the 2020-2021 season.

<sup>16</sup> HRDINOVÁ, R. Opera – báječné nedorozumění? (dva měsíce s operou v Lipsku) [Opera – A Charming Misunderstanding? (Two Months with the Opera in Leipzig)], p. 126.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.





Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: *Eugene Onegin*. Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 16 September 2005. Monika Fabiánová (Olga), Adriana Kohútiová (Tatyana). Photo by Alena Klenková. Slovak National Theatre archives.

the titular heroine recovers from a stupor from soporific tea, which Kostelnička had brewed for her so that she could secretly abduct Jenůfa's love child. In the bulletin, Peter Konwitschny expressed his belief that it would be "an eternal pity if the violinist sat in the orchestra and the audience did not perceive that it was a duet"<sup>18</sup> and he visualized Leoš Janáček's idea accordingly. The violinist, in her long black dress, became for a moment not only the musical but also the theatre partner of the central heroine to underline an idea that was fundamental for the director: "Everybody abandoned Jenůfa, only Janáček with his music stands by her."<sup>19</sup>

Paul Dessau's *Lancelot* offers a similar musical situation as Janáček's opera. The instrumentally opulent score, which synthesizes the history of twentieth-century European music in an original way, provides the listeners with a short acoustic asylum in the form of a lyrical duet of Lancelot with the cello, during which the tired hero recovers from his fight with the Dragon. In the context of a very dynamic staging in terms of visuals and motion (co-production of Theater Erfurt and Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar, 2019), it was also a rare, contrasting moment of contemplative

<sup>18</sup> KONWITSCHNY, P. – KRISPIN, B. – BARTZ, B. Oper ist nicht nur Abbildung unseres Lebens, sondern auch Modell. [Interview]. In *Leoš Janáček: Jenůfa*. [Programme booklet]. Cited from WELKER, A. (ed.). *Peter Konwitschny. „Mensch, Mensch, Mensch!“ Oper als Zentrum der Gegenwart*, p. 255.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

silence from an illustrative point of view: the director made the two performers sit facing each other in front of a white wall and let them simply sing and play. In Leoš Janáček's *Věc Makropulos* (Slovak National Theatre, 2015), the director placed the viola d'amore player in a box in the proscenium. Separated from the group of instruments, she not only acoustically underscored Emilia Marty's final statement about the futility of an artificially prolonged life, inspired by the composer's humanistic convictions, but, in the words of the opera critic Robert Bayer, "with its melody, sound and, ultimately, its name, it was a dramaturgically important instrument for Konwitschny, which transposed the message of the libretto into the language of music."<sup>20</sup>

In the production of Giacomo Meyerbeer's grand opera *Les Huguenots* (Semperoper Dresden, 2019), which ends with an apocalyptic scene of Saint Bartholomew's Eve, the instrumentalist, figuratively speaking, has the last word. In the final scene of the massacre of Protestants, men, women, and children ran onto the stage and fell under machine gun fire. However, the director did not let the opera end in the spirit of the prevailing tradition, i.e. with a dramatic finale with cymbals, drums, and trumpets. He capitalized on the fact that *Les Huguenots* has several versions which, due to the non-existence of a critical edition of the opera, are commonly combined or cut in their musical stagings, and moved the bass clarinet solo from the interlude in Act Four to the end of the opera. In this scenic context, the sad melody rendered by the player directly on a stage littered with dead bodies sounded like a mournful memento mori.

In the staging of Othmar Schoeck's opera *Penthesilea* (co-production, Theater Bonn, 2017, Landestheater Linz, 2018), a musical instrument received the main scenic role. The Swiss author's work of 1927 stands out for its unusual instrumentation, bold even for that progressive time. It is dominated by two pianos in addition to ten clarinets and a string section with a predominance of deep instruments and it was these two pianos that became the central protagonists of Konwitschny's concept. In one of his interviews, he noted the following: "I consider Penthesilea to be one of my most important productions: Just two grand pianos on the stage that give wings to the imagination and suddenly can become anything. This is not just a reduction; with this I force the spectator to enter with his imagination."<sup>21</sup>

The staging did not actually work with any props and the only "flats" used were the two large grand pianos. In addition to their important instrumental position in the score, they became the bearers of the male-female principle: one of them was played by a young girl, the other by a boy of her age. The position of the pianos on the stage was not static; the soloists and the choristers manipulated them spatially according to the development of the plot. In moments of emotional closeness between Penthesilea and Achilles, they brought the instruments closer to each other (e.g. during their love duet), whereas in moments of conflict they moved them further apart (e.g. when Penthesilea was captured). Peter Konwitschny transferred the drastic end of the opera, in which Schoeck, like the author of the literary original Heinrich von Kleist, narrates in an epic way Achilles's miserable end (Penthesilea, maddened by

<sup>20</sup> BAYER, R. Vec (takmer) svetového významu je humanistický apel [Humanistic Appeal Is a Matter of (Almost) Global Significance]. In *kód*, 2016, Vol. 10, Issue 2, p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> KONWITSCHNY, P. – LANGE, J. Es geht um den Funken des Lebens in uns allen... [Interview]. In *nmz.online*, 19 May 2019. [online]. [cit. 4 May 2022]. Available at: <https://www.nmz.de/online/es-geht-um-den-funken-des-lebens-in-uns-allen-peter-konwitschny-im-gespraech>.



Paul Dessau: *Lancelot*. Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar, 2019. Photo by Candy Welz. Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar archives.

despair over his supposed betrayal of her, tears him to pieces with her pack of dogs), explicitly to a concert form. The performer of Penthesilea, previously dishevelled and wearing only a white underskirt, appeared on the stage beautifully groomed – in a black velvet gown, washed of blood, scratches and bruises, with her hair tied up in an elegant hairdo. She sang an aria about the connection of love and death from sheet music, under which the gallant performer of Achilles had put a comfortable stand. In search of an explanation for the unexpected end of the drastic story, Robert Bayer offered an interesting reasoning: “It is as if this doyen of opera direction finally allowed himself to criticize the genre, in which conflicts and real dramas can, without sincerity in expression, appear alien and exaggerated, like Achilles’s foul play for love and Penthesilea’s obsession with an ossified and regressive tradition.”<sup>22</sup> According to the theatre makers, any illustration of the text or foul play for theatre would be out of place in this pure space. As Albert Einstein, quoted by Konwitschny in the bulletin, notes: “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”<sup>23</sup>

While in the above-mentioned examples from Peter Konwitschny’s directorial oeuvre solo instruments appeared on the stage, in his other stagings, groups of instruments, or even the entire orchestra, became the direct actors of the plot. In his

<sup>22</sup> BAYER, R. Konwitschného večný súboj pohlaví [Konwitschny’s Eternal Battle of the Sexes]. In *kod*, 2019, Vol. 51, Issue 6, p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> KONWITSCHNY, P. – BARTZ, B. – KAFTAN, K. Versuchs – Anordnung. [Interview]. In *Othmar Schoeck: Penthesilea*. [Programme booklet]. Linz : Landestheater Linz, 2018, p. 16.

already mentioned staging of Dessau's *Lanzelot*, composed for such a huge instrumental apparatus that it cannot even fit into a regular orchestra pit, Konwitschny placed the thirteen-member percussion group onto the stage. This solution, undoubtedly practical from a musical and operational point of view, was also given a theatre justification. The scenic designer Helmut Brade created two mobile "wagons" with their cables shining in red for the percussion instruments, visually materializing the musical characteristics of a thundering Dragon on stage. Alongside this percussion ensemble, a trio of a harp, viola and flute appeared on the stage to accompany a parade of aerial weapons projected by the Dragon onto a large screen. After the show ended, the Dragon eliminated the female musicians as inconvenient witnesses with a hand-held lighter, but they immediately appeared on the screen in the form of Baroque angels playing music in the blue sky. Peter Konwitschny thus (and not only in this *mise-en-scène*) readily responded to the ironic-comic aspect, which is one of the most remarkable principles of Dessau's score.

While the treatment of the percussion section in *Lanzelot* partly responded to the spatial determinants of the theatres in Weimar and Erfurt, the score of Bernd Alois Zimmermann's opera *Die Soldaten* directly prescribes an instrumental ensemble on stage. In addition to the main orchestra, the approximately one-hundred-member apparatus also includes a stage orchestra composed of percussion instruments and a jazz combo. Both ensembles entered Peter Konwitschny's staging (Staatstheater Nürnberg, 2018) right at the beginning. While the main orchestra, placed in the pit, played the prelude with the curtain open, the audience looked at the not yet occupied drum kits set up on raised platforms. With mute visual support, the spectators could realize even more intensively the musical grip of this attacking opus, in which the orchestral element is the defining musical-dramaturgical component. The effect was named very aptly by the dramaturge of the production, Kai Wessler: "In the minds of the spectators, the plot is transferred from a real stage to an imaginary one. The apocalypse heralded by the prelude is concluded at the end of the opera."<sup>24</sup> Peter Konwitschny did not conceive this opulent dramatic work in the spirit of its staging tradition, nor as a theatrically intense mosaic of individual dramas. To fulfil its purpose from the opening to the tragic point, the final apocalyptic bars of Zimmermann's score were omitted. Instead, the orchestra's sound contracted into a long, wailing tone at the end of the production, and the echogram of a heart was shown on the side screens, where subtitles had been projected until then. It ended with a fatal straight line, announcing the death of the central heroine Marie Wesener.

## Conclusion

Peter Konwitschny perceives opera theatre as a space where the theatre maker is obliged to convey his view of the society and its values to the audience. Without exception, his stagings are socially critical, civically committed, morally appealing, and determined by the artist's left-wing world view, which does not hide its irreconcilable opposition to capitalism and the consumerist way of life, nor its contempt for the so-called culinary opera. Adhering to the aesthetic theory of Theodor W. Adorno,

<sup>24</sup> WESSLER, K. Musik, Theater, Raum. Dramaturgische Beobachtungen. In *Bernd Alois Zimmermann: Die Soldaten*. [Programme booklet]. Nürnberg : Staatstheater Nürnberg, 2018, p. 15.

Peter Konwitschny perceives and interprets opera as active politics in the sense of the Greek polis. Over time, he created a database of procedures and theatre means of expression that became his signature characteristics. With some exaggeration, these could be called a catalogue of recognizable, constantly occurring signs that have acquired the semantic meaning of isotopies. In this paper, we have analysed those that are directly derived from the musical material of the staged scores: the theatre visualization of musical punchlines, the ironization of musical clichés, a critical attitude towards the illustrative use of music, a unique approach to the ballet items in the operas, and the presence of musical instruments on the stage in the role of symbols. The importance of the musical analysis of the staged works is reflected not only in Peter Konwitschny's own scenic works, but he insists on it also in the pedagogical formation of the next generation of directors: "When I teach, I tell the students: You must not make the mistake of reading the libretto first. If you do that, you run the risk that the music will appear to you only as a confirmation of the text. So forget the text, as much as you can, listen to the music, and perceive and recognize the things that bring something other than the text does. Then the whole work is staged, not just a part of it."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> KONWITSCHNY, P. – LANGE, J. Es geht um den Funken des Lebens in uns allen... [Interview]. In *nmz.online*, 19/05/2019. [online]. [cit. 4 May 2021]. Available at: <https://www.nmz.de/online/es-geht-um-den-funken-des-lebens-in-uns-allen-peter-konwitschny-im-gesprach>.

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