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# Between Body and Sound: The Theatre of Wojtek Blecharz

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The article attempts a synthetic overview of Wojtek Blecharz's major theatrical projects, including specifically his opera productions, such as *Transcryptum*, *Park-Opera*, *Body-Opera*, *Fiasko* [*Fiasco*] and *Rechnitz-Opera* (*Anioł Zagłady* [*The Exterminating Angel*]). What these shows have in common is a clear tendency to transcend traditional operatic conventions, associated with both the form of the genre and its reception.

The composer's musical and theatrical experiments focus on sound – its performativity and inseparable link to corporality. The privileging of the body and musical gesture goes hand in hand with enhancing the visual aspect of music, which makes it possible to see even Blecharz's autonomous compositions in terms of performance and often also instrumental theatre. This article presents the operatic work of Blecharz against the background of contemporary theories related to the performativity of music and its intermedia contexts.

Keywords: Wojtek Blecharz; opera, musical theatre; performativity; body

At the heart of a majority of Wojtek Blecharz's theatre projects is sound — not only as the principal matter, the material of the show, but also as a topic and an issue subject to broader aesthetic and philosophical reflection. What is crucial for Blecharz as a composer and director is above all the question of

acoustic perception — opposing established modes of hearing that concert halls and theatre stages have accustomed us to.

> At some point I felt . . . that we have been repeating the same perceptional patterns and models for generations, but there is little reflection on why we receive art in this way. I get the impression that as a listener — whether it is an opera, a concert, or a theatre performance — my body, my physicality disappears the moment the show begins, that I am in a way deprived of it. My role then is to participate in an aesthetic experience, but chiefly through the senses of hearing and sight because I cannot move or express my emotions, which contradicts the fact that perception is embodied and we perceive the world 'with our whole body' (*Na co dzień zajmuję się tym…*, 2017).

The above reflection conveys not only a critique aimed at the institutional frameworks that codify the modalities of listening to music, but also an attempt to define one's own attitude to sound and its perception. In the compositions of Wojtek Blecharz there is a very strong need to express music through the body. The issue of corporeality relates closely to both the suggested performance practice and the process of sound perception itself, which is meant to be a thoroughly somatic experience. The privileging of the body and the musical gesture is paired with the appreciation of the visual aspect of music, which means that even Blecharz's autonomous compositions can be considered in terms of performance art, and sometimes even of instrumental theatre. Features borrowed from the visual arts or dance theatre are often an immanent part of his works. Characteristically, Blecharz constantly searches for inspirations beyond music, employing various

cultural codes in his compositions, including philosophical, literary, pop-cultural and autobiographic elements. Composing appears here as a broader process of "installing" sound in cultural space, as well bringing out its performative potential. This strategy is close to what the Irish composer Jennifer Walshe defines in her 2016 manifesto as "The New Discipline":

> 'The New Discipline' is a term I've adopted over the last year. The term functions as a way for me to connect compositions which have a wide range of disparate interests but all share the common concern of being rooted in the physical, theatrical and visual, as well as musical; pieces which often invoke the extra-musical, which activate the non-cochlear. In performance, these are works in which the ear, the eye and the brain are expected to be active and engaged. Works in which we understand that there are people on the stage, and that these people are/have bodies (Walshe, 2016).

Wojtek Blecharz's preoccupation with the corporeality and performative dimension of music has led him to step into the realm of theatre, and that with works that make up an aesthetically cohesive and unique stage project. It includes operas, sound installations and music performances, as well as compositions written for other directors' shows, always however constituting a highly distinct component of the production, and sometimes actually coming to the fore, as in Magda Szpecht's *Schubert. A Romantic Composition for Twelve Performers and a String Quartet* (2016), Wojciech Grudziński's *Rodos* (2019), or Katarzyna Kalwat's *Staff Only* (2019).

# Opera/Installation

Wojtek Blecharz debuted on the big theatrical stage with the opera/installation *Transcryptum* (2013), commissioned by the National Opera in Warsaw. Blecharz not only wrote the music and the libretto, but also directed the site-specific show. He decided to eschew the traditional stage and auditorium, installing the different parts of the opera in the hallways and various corners and recesses of the Grand Theatre building. The public was divided into five groups that, led by a guide, navigated the designated routes, visiting, among other places, the painting workshop, the laundry, or the choir rehearsal room. These places, usually off limits for the spectators, corresponded with the opera's five acts. The overarching theme that connected all parts was trauma, the record of a specific, individual experience that is translated into the language of sounds and accompanying images. The opera's title alludes to a term coined by the Israeli visual artist and psychoanalyst Bracha L. Ettinger: "transcryptum is the art object or art event, art operation or artprocedure, which incarnates transcription of trauma and cross-inscriptions of its traces" (Ettinger, 2007, p. 166). Blecharz's opera can be considered as a musical transcription of trauma — a sonic record of the painful experiences of a woman who is confronted with a double loss: of her husband and her son. The story however is not recounted directly; the different parts of the opus deal only with its fragments, becoming its enigmatic traces, chaotic signs with which the viewers, passing through the winding corridors, composes the story proper. Each time, sound is what guides them around this labyrinth — sound as the "medium of memory, a binding agent that connects images into shreds of recollections" (Blecharz, 2013). The possible interpretations of *Transcryptum* are determined not only by the viewers' individual experience, but also the

sequence in which they visit the different spaces of the venue.

Importantly, the musical events “installed” throughout the Grand Theatre took place simultaneously, and each part could function as an autonomous whole. The opening piece, *K’an for steel drum and ca. 130 sticks*, was actually written much earlier, as a composition inspired by John Cage’s *Branches*, a famous work for cacti and other organic instruments. Other *Transcryptum* pieces too were turned into concert versions, such as *The Map of Tenderness* for solo cello (Act III) or *3rd phase* for two accordions (Act IV). The compositions that make up the opera/installation share a common theme, but they do not constitute an organized sequence of meanings, nor are they bound by a stage narrative in the traditional sense of the word. Alinearity and fragmentariness as compositional principles were meant to correspond with the structure of trauma, its chaotic and unpredictable representations; hence the use of association, symbol, and brachylogy, in both the auditory and visual elements.

Though lacking narrative continuity, *Transcryptum* has a precisely defined beginning and end. During the show, percussionist Katarzyna Bojaryn performed the initial *K’an…* in a darkened auditorium, rearranging and shuffling thin wooden sticks with great concentration. The piece, in which the gesture as such featured prominently, brought to mind a ritual, thus prefiguring the opera’s successive acts, in which clichés from the past are obsessively revived and trauma is worked through. The viewers too, of course, partake in this process, gaining access — through sounds, visuals, and fragments of the libretto (files containing evidentiary documents) — to the most intimate and darkest personal details about the show’s protagonist, played by the mezzo-soprano Anna Radziejewska.

Musically, Blecharz’s opera employs a limited range of the means of

expression, including a highly reduced performing apparatus. The *Transcryptum* score is written for seven instrumentalists and a soloist, although their parts combine only in the final act. Before that, the audience listens only to one or several instruments, as well as Radziejewska's voice and her disturbing, rhythmic breathing, recurring in various iterations. This is enriched with electronics. Locating the different parts of *Transcryptum* backstage allowed for very close, virtually intimate contact between the viewers and the musicians, which a traditional stage would not have been able to provide. The reception of the sounds was intensified by the particular acoustics of the rooms; in this way, also the architecture of the venue became a resonating system.

To a large extent, Blecharz's first opera deals with issues that were already tackled in his earlier works. Principal among those is the relationship between music and the body. An interest in the corporeality and gesture of the performer and in the somatic reception of sound can be considered as a consequence of Blecharz's long-time collaboration with Jacek Łumiński and the ensemble of the Silesian Dance Theatre. It is also an effect of searching for inspirations beyond the realm of music: in philosophy, visual arts, dance, theatre, or pop culture. This physical aspect of music and its performative potential were already manifest in compositions such as *Phenotype* for a prepared and amplified violin (2012) or *Means of Protection* for female voice, accordion, and cello (2012). These pieces, in which the performer's corporeality matters as much as the sound they produce, can be regarded as a prelude, as it were, to *Transcryptum* and Blecharz's subsequent stage projects. The word "stage" is in fact merely notional here, for both *Transcryptum* and the operas produced in association with other theatres usually go beyond the bounds of the traditional stage and the perceptual conventions associated with it.

## *The Park Opera* and Cross-Modal Perception

In 2016, at Skaryszewski Park in Warsaw, *The Park Opera* premiered, produced by Warsaw's Powszechny Theatre. As the title suggests, the "plot" is set in a park, and the opera's main theme are nature sounds. The libretto, peculiar as it is, comprises nine acts, each written for a specific section of the park, which the audience freely wanders around. This musical trip is preceded by a short lecture on the history of opera and its connections to nature. Next, the viewers enter a highly diverse and sensual world of sounds, originating primarily from the natural environment. The sensations occurring in this encounter are deliberately intensified, by means, for example, of "sound binoculars," wireless speakers, or instruments installed around the park to be used by the participants. In *The Park Opera*, Wojtek Blecharz again plays slyly with the operatic convention, stripping it of monumentality and depriving of its elitist nature. As a setting, a park is not only an open space, but also one that provokes a new type of reception. The perceptual process proceeds here according to the individual choice of the viewers, who decide what they listen to (roaming around the park is inherent to the opera), how they listen (assuming positions other than a seated one is highly recommended), and how long they listen (one can leave the given section of the park at any time).

As in *Transcryptum*, the composer's purpose here is to integrate the viewers into the show's structure and to bring them as close as possible to the materials that constitute it, including the principal one, that is sound. Besides natural sounds, *The Park Opera* features pieces composed for particular objects or places in the park: an overture performed by Sinfonia Varsovia musicians situated around Lake Kamionkowskie, the aria of a water-pond Mermaid (voice by soprano Barbara Kinga Majewska), or a mini-

concerto for a toy piano played by Bartek Wąsik at one of the clearings. The chorus parts, consisting of the voices of the park's birds, were pre-recorded. Walking along the map-indicated route, viewers were also certain to come across the ballet — a group of volunteer joggers equipped with wireless speakers, who were meant as a "living, moving sound installation, a cloud that. . . interacted with the audience" (*Publiczność przykłada ucho*, 2016). Even more than *Transcryptum*, *The Park Opera* encouraged the audience to listen actively and discover sounds for themselves. Thus the viewers became co-authors of the libretto, which changed depending on the route adopted, the degree of participation, and individual sonic sensibility.

Analyzing the form of *The Park Opera*, it is not difficult to notice that, on the one hand, the composer made sure to preserve all of the genre's constitutive elements (aria, recitative, chorus, ballet), but, on the other hand, invested them with completely new meanings, thus undermining the integrity of the operatic work. The different acts, or materials, that make up *The Park Opera* can be arranged in any sequence, or perceived selectively. In this sense, Blecharz's compositional strategy is close to the experiments of other contemporary opera authors, such as Peter Ablinger, Heiner Goebbels, or Brian Ferneyhough, who replace a consistent narrative with fragmentariness, a collage of images and forms, emphasizing the viewer's active participation in the process of interpreting musical events[1].

The sources of a similar philosophy of musical theatre and opera — a philosophy underpinned by conceptualism, experimentation, and a turn away from the institutionalization of art — should however be sought already in the musical/theatrical practices of the Fluxus movement. Acting with great determination and a keen sense of humour, artists such as La Monte Young, Nam June Paik, Henning Christiansen, or Dick Higgins pushed the limits of

traditional opera, undoing its structure and searching for unobvious sources of sound, finding them in the urban landscape, everyday objects, machines, domestic appliances, or the “musicalized” corporeality and speech of the participants.

> What these different compositions and the practices that the Fluxus artists categorized as operas share is, above all, the ironic testing of the boundaries of a form considered as fossilized. All of the Fluxus “operas” put the meaning of the term in parentheses, revaluating and examining the relevancy of the formula of the operatic work in the reality of post-Cagean aesthetics. Although their provocative edge has been dulled by time, the questions raised by the titles of specific pieces remain valid (Michnik, 2016).

The theatrical experiments of the precursor of Fluxus, John Cage (*Water Music*, *Water Walk*, or *Theatre Piece*), performances such as Paik’s *Robot Opera*, Christiansen’s *Kartoffel Opera*, or finally Dick Higgins’s operas laid the groundwork for new thinking about the connections between music and theatre. Instead of traditionally defined narrativity, as present in classical opera, the Fluxus artists proposed a new kind of music theatre, where sound and image are linked through a formal concept rather than a plot. Even though they had very precise scores — take for example Eric Andersen’s *Opera Without Title* or *Opera With Title*, or Emmett Williams’s famous *An Opera* — the music shows of Fluxus were highly open to chance and active audience participation. Aleatorism, simultaneity, and a new status of the viewer (as a co-creator of acoustic events rather than merely a passive recipient) form the basis of Fluxus operas, which clearly stem from the spirit of Dadaism[2]. Not without its significance was also the issue of space, or

rather an irresistible striving to lead the viewer out of the traditional concert hall, situate them at the centre of the event, encircle them with sound and image, and thus to bring forth a new perceptual situation that would activate various sensory channels.

In an analysis of the effect of Fluxus events, which are usually associated with intermedia art, it seems adequate to introduce the notion of crossmodal perception, or, as Hanna B. Higgins (2002) proposes, crossmodal aesthetics, which takes into account the interactions of various senses (hearing, touch, smell, taste, and sight). According to Higgins, already John Cage's *Theatre Piece No. 1* (1952) showed that what the Black Mountain College artists were interested in was not merely a random juxtaposition of practices from the fields of different artistic disciplines (David Tudor's concert, Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, John Cage's lecture on Zen Buddhism, or Merce Cunningham's dance), but above all a mutual permeation of the senses, inscribed, as it were, in the "logic of the piece" (Higgins, 2014, p. 209). The polysensory, interdisciplinary and immersive qualities of Fluxus events define a certain model of the spectacle, one that has found a continuation in the practices of numerous twenty-first-century composers. Regardless of how we label their work — what applies broadly here, besides the notion of "The New Discipline," is Harry Lehmann's category of relational music[3] — there is a clearly noticeable shift towards the performativity and intermediality of musical works. It is somewhere at this pole — between the Fluxus event score and today's performative turn in music — that the theatrical and musical work of Wojtek Blecharz is located.

## The "Embodying" of Sound

The absence of traditionally defined narrativity, a search for new sources

and spaces of sound, as well as a turn towards the corporeality of the performer and the viewer are the characteristic features of the operas and installations/shows of Wojtek Blecharz. An affinity with Fluxus is evident in the way the composer treats the sonic material (experimenting with the instrumentarium, making use of non-instrumental acoustic phenomena) as much as in how designs the relations with the audience (interactivity, polysensoriality, removing the distance between the viewer and the performer, going beyond the concert or theatre hall). The work in which these principles have been most fully implemented to date was *The Body Opera*, which premiered in 2017 at Warsaw's Nowy Theatre[4].

"This opera is dedicated to your body" is the message that opens the show and encourages the viewer to sensually "experience" the work's successive parts. The very design of the performance space, by Ewa Maria Śmigielska, indicated an abolition of operatic conventions and receptive habits. In the Nowy's auditorium, all chairs were removed and replaced with yoga mats. Each of the stations was equipped with an electric pillow, a blanket, and a black box with gadgets that are used to intensify the process of listening in the course of the show. A rectangular platform dividing the space into two even parts served as a substitute of the stage.

In virtually ascetic conditions, without the glamour and glitz usually associated with opera, a two-hour musical performance was initiated that had listening as its subject — the way acoustic signals are perceived and processes by the body. "We don't have to consider *The Body Opera* as an opus," the composer said shortly before the premiere. "It can be simply an introduction to the next concert or a clue to how to open up to sound" (*Body-Opera jest wskazówką…*, 2017). As in *The Park Opera*, Blecharz does not look for anchor points in fiction, literature, or the narrative order, instead

urging the viewer to look into their own body, perceived not only as a resonator of sounds, but also as a kind of instrument. The first of the propositions of alternative, anti-operatic listening is the overture, which the spectators take in in the dark, lying on the mats. A recumbent position is actually recommended for most of the scenes in the show. The overture, which consists of acoustic waves of various intensity, is a dozen-or-so-minute-long "sound massage," experienced through vibrating transducer speakers hidden in the pillows. This relaxing prologue is followed by a warm-up — a Resonance Training session led as a video conference by Wiebke Renner. The session includes breathing and muscular exercises meant to stimulate certain parts of the body so as to facilitate and intensify the process of experiencing sounds.

In *The Body Opera*, listening to music is a somatic experience — the different parts of the work are meant to mobilize particular senses, among which hearing is but one of the receptive instruments. The performative and perceptual agenda for the successive musical parts is to activate sight, taste, smell, as well as different parts of the body. One example of such polysensorial experiences is the *Candy Aria*, during which the viewers eat popping candy, and perfume is sprayed in the air to enhance the intensity of auditory sensations. In the final part of the show, audience members listen to music blindfolded and wearing earplugs, so that the sounds coming from the pillow speakers are experienced mainly through the body, as vibrations. It can be said, therefore, that the "multimodal sensory experience," which, as Higgins reminds us (2014, p. 212), is a legacy of the avant-gardes of the first and second halves of the twentieth century, is inscribed, as it were, in the work's score and shared as much by the performers as by the audience.

In Blecharz's opera-for-the-body, music reaches the viewer from various

sources and in many forms: as instrumental live improvisations, as pre-recorded material (the voices of the featured artists or a self-quotation — the track *Techno* from the show *Soundwork*), or as the effect of the audience's active participation (breathing, rustles, a joint mantra, experiments with bodily acoustics). Quotations from classical operas — a fragment of Richard Wagner's *Valkyries*, the *Nessun dorma* tenor aria from Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*, or the *Scherza infida* from George Friderick Handel's late-Baroque opera *Ariodante* — form an important part of the show's musical layer. All these works, however, are evoked in novel perceptual conditions, much different from the standards of the concert or theatre hall.

Live music is performed by two instrumentalists only — Beltane Ruiz Moline on double-bass and Alexandre Babel on percussions. However, the way they elicit sounds from their instruments is unorthodox and includes hitting the resonating chamber, rubbing various parts of the body against the instruments, or combining their sounds with shouts, foot stamps, and loud, spasmodic breathing. Thunder sheets — thin sheets of metal than can produce a wide variety of sound effects — play an important role in creating the soundscape of *The Body Opera*; significantly, the very way the performers interact with these idiophones is spectacular. What comes to the fore in Blecharz's experimental opera is a close relationship between the body and the instrument — based on the testing of performative and acoustic possibilities, and, at the same time, forging a network of surprising interferences. Most importantly, its reflection is also to be found on the level of the viewer's experience, for, as Higgins writes, music by its very definition "initiates a shared physical, tactile, auditory, temporal experience" (2014, p. 213).

The process of "embodying" music, that is of emphasizing its performative

dimension through interaction with the performer's body, is an issue to which Blecharz devotes a lot of attention, both in his autonomous works and in those made for theatre. The musician's body, which he never considers solely as a tool, each time becomes a vital element of the performance, a bearer of meanings, a source of associations and of visual and auditory codes. This tendency, perfectly exemplified by *The Body Opera*, can also be found in Blecharz's joint projects with other directors. In Magda Szpecht's *Schubert. A Romantic Composition for Twelve Performers and a String Quartet* (Teatr Dramatyczny im. Jerzego Szaniawskiego, Wałbrzych, 2016), the instrumentalists' musical gesture not only provokes stage action, but also determines the structure of the whole show. This is evident in scenes that quote the different parts of Franz Schubert's *String Quartet in D minor (Death and the Maiden)*, as well as in Blecharz's composition *Liminal Studies*, which complements the main musical motif and serves as a kind of body-and-sound laboratory. Also in Katarzyna Kalwat's *Staff Only* (Biennale Warszawa/TR Warszawa, 2019) we witness the process of the "embodying" of acoustic events — the show's musical layer is produced by immigrant actors through rhythmic speech, singing, and the playing of percussions. Their frustration, anger, and disappointment at the way foreign actors are handled by the system are translated into a highly rich and precise language of sounds that reveals its performative and subversive properties. Blecharz made use here of a similar technique as in his earlier show *Soundwork*(TR Warszawa, 2016), which means that the actors' gestures, movements, and actions gain musical meanings.

In *The Body Opera*, the performative dimension of music[5] is enhanced by the presence of dancer Karol Tymiński. His choreography is a kind of spontaneous response to the acoustic events, illustrating the process of struggling with musical matter: its unpredictability, dynamics, and chaos.

Tymiński's movements tell no particular story, convey no specific meanings; rather, they are simply a somatic reaction to sound, its "embodiment." Dance is here a pure visualization of music.

*The Body Opera* explores the relationship between the body and sound extensively and on many levels, drawing attention to the materiality and performativity of the latter. In other words, it is precisely the body, embedded in a particular space and time, that invests music with a performative function:

> Sonic performativity in theatre is born . . . in encounter with the living body of the actor, with the space, and above all in direct contact with the viewer who becomes a co-author of the images and meanings emerging with music's participation. . . . On the one hand, this specific correlation of corporeality, spatiality, and sonicity emphasizes the materiality of the show, exposing the phenomenal status of its different elements; on the other hand, it undermines the stability of the traditional perceptual process, where viewers decode meanings arbitrarily dictated by the performers (Figzał, 2017, p. 208–209).

Interestingly, few meanings are in fact arbitrarily dictated by the author in *The Body Opera*. The viewer is almost constantly encouraged to discover the different acoustic events for themselves and to connect them with (potential) subjective associations. The lack of a plot and of specific semantic assignments are features that put Blecharz's show in opposition to classic opera works, based on a libretto and musically unfolding action. What is challenged here is not only the function of the basic formal elements of the

opera, but also the reception model that they imply. What matters the most here is the gesture of eschewing the traditional stage and replacing it with an environmental arrangement of the performance space, where the distance between the performers and the audience disappears and their shared bodily presence becomes a source of the proper theatrical and musical experience.

Projects such as *The Park Opera*, *The Body Opera*, *Soundwork*, or *House of Sound* (Teatr im. Juliusza Słowackiego, Cracow, 2017) share a focus on sound, its parameters, and the ways of producing and perceiving it. *Transcryptum* breaks with this model, awarding a prominent role, besides the music itself, to the outline of a concrete story that the viewer compiles in the course of the successive acts.

A firmer shift towards narration, though not yet towards a plot, occurs in two subsequent projects by Blecharz: the opera *Fiasco*, which premiered in 2018 at the Staatstheater Darmstadt, and the installation *The Black Square. A Musical Game* presented in the same year at the Dom Kultury Kadr in Warsaw. What the two projects had in common was not only an open and performative form that allowed for moving freely (or according to directorial instructions) around the performance venues, but also the subject: the collapse of a particular system of cultural regulations. In *Fiasco*, this is the ecological and social order; in *The Black Square*, the linguistic and semantic one.

A joint project with Małgorzata Wdowik and the directing collective K.A.U., *Fiasco* can be seen as a story about Europe's crisis and a search for new communities that would ensure the restoration of the bond and lost equilibrium between man, culture, and nature. As pointed out by the show's co-author, Matthias Schönijahn, this is an utopian search (Schönijahn, 2018,

p. 6–8).

A film documenting the artists' trip beyond the borders of the European Union is the actual libretto of *Fiasco*. The recorded images and the sounds that accompany them present different varieties of the forest, considered here as a metaphor of the relationship between man and nature. These screenings correspond with parts performed live by a trio of musicians (Stefanie Mirwald, Sylvia Hinz, Rupert Enticknap). The music layer of *Fiasco* is a sonic collage combining various performing practices and styles, experimenting with the instrumentarium, and making use of quotations and borrowings. However, Antoni Michnik is right to note that this complex structure finds its point of departure in the breath: "individual breathing is paired with the swoosh of nature, with which it remains in a constant dialogue" (*Nigdy więcej nie poszliśmy do lasu…*, 2020). As in *The Park Opera* or *The Body Opera*, the role that the viewer plays in this polyphonic space is based on active and selective listening. A bit like a wanderer in a forest, the audience can take different paths, which again brings attention to the highly participative nature of Blecharz's stage projects.

Interactivity and participation form also the basis of *The Black Square. A Musical Game*[6], a performative installation featuring actresses of the Teraz Poliż collective. Directed by Blecharz, the project's main inspiration came from Anna Świrszczyńska's one-act play, *The Black Square*, a blend of the theatre of the absurd and grotesque. The adaptation focused on the sound qualities of the text, which the poet's theatrical miniatures actually never lack in:

> In her one-act plays, Świrszczyńska creates bizarre worlds beyond comprehension or classification. These images undermine the

> logical order of reality, indicating a poetic imagination, a sensibility to the sonic values of the word, surrealism (Puzio, 2019, p. 46).

In Blecharz's *Black Square*, therefore, the viewers follow the sound, and laughter is their main guide around the floors and recesses of the Kadr culture centre. In fact, in the different spaces of the installation there constantly reverberate Świerszczyńska's words: "After all, you're a human being. If you can't do the absurd, you'll die" (1984, p. 78). Characters, props, visual symbols, and single lines derived from the play become a source of performative musical situations in which the viewer is included. The very process of moving around brings to mind the labyrinth of *Transcryptum*, but in *The Black Square* these are mostly individual wanderings, requiring a greater degree of commitment and participation. Interacting with sounds, words, and the bodies of the actresses-as-guides, the viewer becomes a co-author of the performance.

## *Rechnitz. Opera*: The Sound of Crime

"I don't refer to literature, I look at what I feel closer to, above all contemporary art" (*Body-Opera jest wskazówką…*, 2017), Blecharz said in one of the interviews accompanying the premiere of *The Body Opera*. Despite a radical disavowal of literary sources, which is evident in his early operatic projects, he never does completely without a libretto, but rather constructs it on the basis of non-literary sources. In *The Park Opera*, those were natural sounds; in *The Body Opera*, the body's activation and opening to sounds; and in *Fiasco*, the narrative comprised pre-recorded film footage. This strategy, which in a sense consists in fleeing away from literary text as the basis of the operatic universe, was relinquished only in *Rechnitz. Opera*

— *The Exterminating Angel*, a joint project with Katarzyna Kalwat.

*Rechnitz…* is Blecharz's fifth opera. Unlike the previous ones, it was written for a specific literary text: Elfriede Jelinek's moving drama about a crime perpetrated in Rechnitz, Austria, in March 1945. The opera's first version, labelled by its authors as the "performative" one, was presented during the 61st "Warsaw Autumn" International Festival of Contemporary Music on the stage of TR Warszawa. Ultimately, it differed only slightly from the full version which was shown five months later on the same stage, using the same scenographic elements and maintaining similar proxemic relations; what was extended were certain parts of music and text.

In both versions, intimacy and performativity was brought to the fore. The opera is written for ten performers: six actors and a cello quartet. No professional singers are involved; all text-and-music parts are delivered by dramatic actors. This gesture found its justification in the work's main formal concept, which was to emphasize the recitative and find musicality in the text of the drama. In fact, the extraordinary polyphony and rhythmicity of Jelinek's writing made the process easier. It is therefore not the aria, but the recitative that gains first-rate significance in *Rechnitz. Opera*. Interestingly, the composer modifies also the fundamental function of this structural element:

> *Sprechgesang* does not serve here to advance the plot, which is actually not to be found in Jelinek's drama. Instead, the recitative becomes a means of intensifying the text's meanings, allowing its latent spheres to resound. The musicalization of speech not only makes it more powerful, but also makes it easier to interpret the work's different parts (Figzał-Janikowska, 2018, p. 106).

Elfriede Jelinek titled her work *Rechnitz (The Exterminating Angel)*, an allusion to a 1962 film by Luis Buñuel, a sly parable about the fragility and relativity of cultural and ethical norms. In Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador*, a group of aristocrats find themselves inexplicably unable to leave a lavish party and gradually turn into hostile barbarians. Their offensive and unconventional behaviour cannot, however, be equalled with the mass murder that was perpetrated at the castle in Rechnitz in the final months of the war. During a party thrown by the Countess von Batthyány, about 200 Jewish forced labourers held in the basement of the castle were hunted down and killed as entertainment. After perpetrating the massacre, the guests — local SS and Gestapo officers — returned to the party. The crime was covered up and those responsible were never brought to justice.

Jelinek's drama is an attempt to evoke those events, to speak up for the repressed and hushed over. It is a detailed report from the scene of the crime, one that combines several perspectives: journalistic, literary, factual, and surrealist. Delivery Persons/Messengers confined in the castle offer a testimony of what happened there. They assume different identities, and the tone of their statements varies too: the voices of witnesses, accusers, and perpetrators get muddled, forming a polyphonic narrative. Even though there are no dialogues and no individual speaking subjects in Jelinek's text, Blecharz and Kalwat sense these changes of tone perfectly well. The fluid, dynamic and dense avalanche of signs, connotations, and allusions to the contemporary world that the drama comprises is tamed in Blecharz and Kalwat's show by means of musical precision, which applies to both the word and the gesture. The different parts of the text were ascribed to specific actors who through vocal modulation, the repetition of sonic motifs, and speech rhythmization emphasize not only hidden meanings, but also the "sound" of the language of crime. The voice of the Countess (Magdalena

Kuta) occupies a special place in this polyphonic structure. Her lines, moving from whisper through demonic laughter to spasmodic and ecstatic exclamations, arrange themselves into a cruel, irony-streaked testimony that resounds like a fragmented, ominous aria. The voices of the other actors, in turn, provide various contexts for the Rechnitz massacre — testing its variations, paraphrasing, deconstructing, but also deceiving and covering up traces, making it impossible to arrive at the truth. The different testimonies contradict each other and offer no conclusions, breaking off instead or making a narrative twist.

The fragmentariness of Jelinek's text becomes also the supreme compositional principle of the opera: individual phrases never resound completely, always overlapping, at times producing an intended cacophony. There are moments, of course, when polyphony turns into consonant choral singing, as in the phrase "This is how the world ends!", borrowed by Jelinek from T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*. In the show, the words are intoned by one of the actors, then transposed into a characteristic musical leitmotif which the other performers take up vocally.

Blecharz's *Rechnitz. Opera* approximates the form of a performative audio drama. The two principal spheres of the show are defined by the actors, seated behind the score lecterns, and the musicians on the dais. Decorative elements are confined to a symbolic hunting trophy and the Messengers' "worn evening dresses," a clear allusion to Jelinek's stage instructions (Jelinek, 2016). The term "performative audio drama" seems all the more apt because, besides music, the performers' bodily expression plays an extraordinarily important role here. This is true for both the actors and the cellists, whose musical gestures correspond closely with the opera's text layer. "The cello quartet symbolizes what has been left of the palace

orchestra from the times of its former glory," the composer explained (Blecharz, 2018). Interestingly, it is precisely the cello that appears in scenes of apocalyptic visions in the Buñuel film. "History always only tunes its instruments, but seldom plays them," Jelinek writes in *Rechnitz*. Wojtek Blecharz and Katarzyna Kalwat's show can be seen as a musical attempt to attune to history and memory, an attempt that exposes the ineffectiveness of language as a means of bearing witness. The musicalization of speech through the use of *recitativo*, as is done here, does not make it more lucid, but it draws attention to two crucial issues: the ambiguity of the message and — what is particularly important in this case — the performative power of the word.

*Rechnitz. Opera* occupies a rather special place among Wojtek Blecharz's stage projects to date. On the one hand, it is a continuation of explorations focused on sound, its performativity and its inseparable connection with corporeality; on the other hand, it goes far beyond the acoustic-somatic horizon. Sound becomes here a carrier of meanings, a bridge between history, literature, and postmemory. It helps to express the unimaginable and impossible to describe, revealing its new — semantic — function.

Performative practices of contemporary composers are not a new phenomenon; a turn towards corporeality, materiality, and rituality seems to be a natural consequence of some artists' turn away from absolute music, or simply of their realizing the fact that the "bodies playing the music are part of the music, that they're present, they're valid" (Walshe, 2016). One can also look at the trend from a somewhat broader perspective: playing music in front of an audience is always a performative act, and the visual and bodily experience becomes then an inextricable part of the perceptual process. Quoting Georges Aperghis, a leading figure in the field of new

musical theatre, one can say that “there is always a hidden element of theatre in music” (*Hidden Theatre*, 2017).

While Wojtek Blecharz’s stage projects fit into the above-described trends present in contemporary music composition, they nonetheless stand out with their highly individual, conceptualized approach to sonic material. The issues that the composer devotes his theatrical productions to usually revolve around similar topics: relations between body and sound, the process of listening, viewer participation, or (as in *Rechnitz* or *The Black Square*) the semantic function of musical language. These threads are, however, taken up anew each time: it is not only their cultural/philosophical context that changes from work to work, but also the designed perceptual situation or performance concept. Thus Blecharz’s music shows can be perceived as open laboratory projects, where he tests certain possibilities rather than proposing radical and obligatory solutions. These, of course, are possibilities concerning those aspects of audio culture that he is currently preoccupied with.

Operating at the intersection of different art forms (opera, installation, performance art) and different disciplines (music, film, video art, dance), Blecharz’s shows can be classified as multimedia theatre, where the viewer is required to mobilize a number of sensory channels. One should not forget, however, that what seems most important in these productions, and doubtless constitutes their distinctive feature, is a constant striving to open, or sensitize, the audience to sound. This is of particular significance because these shows are very often aimed at dramatic-theatre audiences.

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# Footnotes

1. For more on selected compositional strategies of contemporary opera authors, see Biernacki; Pasiecznik, 2013.
2. It is worth remembering that John Cage, the patron of Fluxus, considered Marcel Duchamp as one of his masters. Cage's fascination with the work of this leading protagonist of the Dada movement and the two artists' long-time friendship resulted in the famous musical performance *Reunion*, staged in 1968 in Toronto. More on the event in: Cross, 1999.
3. The term "relational music" was introduced by Harry Lehmann in response to the identity crisis of the hitherto used category of New Music and the lack of a terminological equivalent for the work of twenty-first century composers, which is based to a large extent on a relation with other media and non-musical contents; see Lehmann, 2013.
4. The work's planned world premiere at the festival in Huddersfield had to be cancelled due to an electrical failure; only fragments were presented.
5. More on the performativity of music in theatre in: Magdalena Figzał, 2017 (chapter 4, *The Performative Dimension of Stage Music*). See also Jan Topolski's paper on the performative practices of contemporary Polish composers (Topolski, 2017).
6. The performative installation *The Black Square. A Musical Game* had its premiere in October 2018. The project was followed up with *The Black Square. Sonata for Keyboard and Tape*, a piece whose premiere performance, featuring Teraz Poliż actresses, took place in July 2020.

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