The frequency of imagination: auditory distress and aurality in contemporary music theatre
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Citation for published version (APA):
Verstraete, P. M. G. (2009). The frequency of imagination: auditory distress and aurality in contemporary music theatre.

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Prologue
Tuning into the Frequency of Imagination

The present study takes as its primary concern the listening act of the listener in contemporary music theatre. The development of the type of music theatre I examine here is fairly recent, mainly since the late 1980s in the contexts of Belgium and the Netherlands. It includes a plethora of forms that emerged in response to a general dissatisfaction with the traditions of opera and theatre. These new forms relate in a complex way to the history of music theatre through processes of legitimisation and self-definition. They not only distinguish themselves from the traditions and models of musical performance, music drama, in particular the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk ('total artwork') as I will argue later, but they are also a continuation and development of the traditional forms of music theatre. Because of these complex relations to the past, music theatre today can be seen as a reaction to the established forms, from which it cannot be separated.

As a consequence, music theatre calls for new approaches in academic scholarship for at least two reasons. On the one hand, my theoretical readings convince me that the methods for analysis and interpretation that are based on certain traditions in theatre and opera to which music theatre reacts are no longer entirely sufficient. On the other hand, I observe in music theatre’s practice today that many newly developing forms tend to fall between the methodological cracks of Theatre Studies and Musicology. They are also difficult to situate historically as they are themselves wilfully in a perpetual state of becoming. Both my theoretical concerns and my practical observations within this emergent field of new music theatre performances convince me that a new approach is needed. I therefore propose here to examine the existing theories and concepts to analyse present-day music theatre performances by means of a new approach. My investigation starts from the observation that new music theatre performances generally disturb the traditional patterns of perception and, in particular, of listening. I contend that these disturbances are not only significant for how we experience these performances, how we make meaning of them and how we appraise them. The interventions in our listening experiences are also key to this new, alternative approach.

My conviction that such a new approach is necessary arose when I experienced what some have defined as ‘new music theatre’ by way of the small-scale performance De Overstroming (2002) by Peter van Kraaij.¹ This performance struck me in its minimalistic approach to the staging of a new

¹ De Overstroming came about as a co-production between Het Net and LOD, which was then still called Het Muziek Lod. There is an earlier version of the performance, which premiered in 2000 with actress Caroline Petrick. I discuss the version of 2002 with actress Yvonne Wiewel at length as a case study in chapter three.
musical composition that partly improvised by Jan Kuijken comes about in relation to text and narrative. In contrast to this minimalism is its title, which refers to the idea of a ‘flood’ in Peter Handke’s short story *Die Überschwemmung* (1963), on which the performance was also based. The text recounts a story of two brothers on a day out by the river: one blind, the other describing what he sees. As the latter’s descriptions start to unfold exaggerated images of water flooding, the blind brother, who listens carefully, starts to doubt the truth of his narrative. In this self-conscious mode of listening, the narrative influences the listener’s experience of the live musical performance, combined with projections of blurred images reflected in a huge mirror on the stage. Whereas the performance would appear to resist any coherent narrative unfolding because of the juxtaposition of text, music and image, the music unmistakably addresses the listener to synthesise the elements and interpret the whole in a narrative way. The music creates interventions of pre-recorded musical phrases, loudspeaker noises and live interferences by the composer playing the cello in the dark, resulting in an excess of intensities, impressions and potential meanings.

*De Overstroming* strengthens my conviction that the disturbing quality of sound, which is manifested as an excess in listening, is the entry point to the new approach to music theatre. I will use the term ‘auditory distress’ as a basis of my approach to describe the alternative experiences that music theatre offers to the contemporary listener. I will show through the notion of auditory distress how the auditory experience during these performances can help us to understand two significant aspects. On the one hand, auditory distress calls for an understanding of how today’s music theatre works in the interplay of several crucial dramaturgical principles and the way sound or music causes this distress in the listener. On the other hand, through auditory distress I explain how the modes of listening help the listener to respond to the disturbances in her or his perception of these performances.² Both concerns contribute to the new approach that I develop in this study.

² As I will explain in more detail in chapter one, the term ‘auditory distress’ helps me to conceptualise the urge of the listener to respond to sound or music as a way to deal with the ‘disturbance’ they might provoke in listening. Other terms that have contributed to similar theoretical considerations are ‘cognitive dissonance’ (coined by Leon Festinger and J. Merrill Carlsmith in 1957) or ‘sonic stroke’ (Meelberg 2008). Though both terms highlight aspects that are similar to the present discussion of the experiences in contemporary music theatre, I choose to use the term ‘auditory distress’ as my central concept in order to avoid the limits that both terms might imply. ‘Cognitive dissonance’ refers to a sense of discomfort that is caused by a tension between conflicting ideas or thoughts at the same time. My understanding of auditory distress shares with the theory of cognitive dissonance that they both consider the perceiver’s urge to find coherence in her or his cognition as a general response to the tensions that sounds may provoke to our thoughts. The term ‘cognitive dissonance’ has already been introduced in relation to the cognitive effects of post-dramatic theatre. However, this term bears the risk of overemphasising the role of cognition, which could ignore bodily aspects of our often unconscious responses in hearing and listening. Meelberg’s term ‘sonic stroke’ would then be
De Overstroming is, moreover, not an example that stands on its own. It relates to the newly developing field of music theatre that is fairly consistent in reacting to the conventional models and traditions of both theatre and opera. By stressing the excess of intensities and meanings in listening, this type of music theatre performance moves away from a traditional preoccupation of a linear development and expression of content through text. In this way, this newly developing music theatre can be seen in relation to recent developments in the theatre through what Hans-Thies Lehmann refers to as ‘post-dramatic’ theatre. Music theatre’s break with synthesis in its mode of production, as De Overstroming also demonstrates, can, however, be regarded as a reaction to the operatic staging tradition with its most influential model of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk.

This model is aimed at an integration or fusion of all the art disciplines in favour of the ‘inner drama’ expressed in the music. Seen this way, De Overstroming is indicative of a type of music theatre practice that is in a state of becoming, but that defies rigid definitions. The disruptions that this music theatre produces highlight a transformation from a tradition that once highly valued drama and synthesis. As such, I propose to look at different examples of contemporary music theatre that react upon these existing theatre and opera traditions, and paradigmatically demonstrate new developments.

Before I explain in more detail which new approach is necessary to understand these developments, I need to frame music theatre in relation to its problems of legitimisation and self-definition against the tradition. In what follows, I will show how the developments of the new forms are rooted in the more accurate in stressing the role of the body in relation to the intensities of sound in the listener. According to Meelberg, the sonic stroke is a sound that, though it does not contain any determinate meaning in itself, it motivates the listener to create meaning through its affective impact. As such, the term helps Meelberg to explain the idea of a ‘musical touch’ as a basis for understanding how the physical relation between music and listener can contribute to a sense of musical gesture (Meelberg 2008: 63, 67). Meelberg’s conceptualisations of the sonic stroke are, however, too much preoccupied with explaining how a musical experience (in his case, atonal music) gives an aural impetus for thinking and reflection. Though many of the experiences in contemporary music theatre share comparable implications as conveyed in the idea of the sonic stroke, as well as in the theory of cognitive dissonance, my understanding of auditory distress consciously detaches the discussion of the impact of sound and music on the listener from an assumed all-encompassing cognition or a musical experience of gestures.

As both a theoretical concept and a model for staging opera, Gesamtkunstwerk only marginally occurs in Wagner’s theoretisations, since his primary concern was the ‘artwork of the future’ in terms of a larger cultural project. The idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk was already prepared at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Novalis, Schlegel, Tieck and Schelling.

My analysis will not aim to be historical, with the exception of the traces of music theatre history I chart here and in the epilogue. I am aware that a historically informed study is needed to complement my synchronistic approach. However, such a diachronic analysis is likely to fail at this point, since music theatre practice is still heavily under development and depends rather on personal artistic trajectories of composers and ensembles. It therefore lacks institutionalisation, though certain forms of new music theatre and a tradition of staging fairly young operatic theatre are due to persist time and consolidate in an ongoing internationalisation.
traditions of both theatre and music theatre with which they have also broken to a certain extent. I will contextualise these developments in a larger cultural framework by charting out the main historical motivations, relations of continuity and divergence with the past. As my main theoretical concerns in this study follow on from these developments, I will refer once more to De Overstroming to formulate my approach and main argument. I will look at the existing theoretical models and methods for analysis, and explain why some of them have become too narrow for an understanding of how this new music theatre works in relation to the listener. From these methodological limitations, I deduce the approach that is necessary to analyse the auditory experiences in such performances. Finally, I relate the new theoretical approach to the case studies. In a brief summary, I explain how each performance contributes to the development of my argument.

1. Contextualising the Development of Music Theatre

Given the complexity of the term ‘music theatre’ today, it is no less than evident to contextualise the striking characteristics, aesthetic developments and crises of definition in relation to its historical practice. However, such a chronological overview would lead me too far from the present concerns of my study. As a way to limit this enterprise, I will only try to historically situate my objects of study to the extent that they add significance to the main features, definitions and developments of music theatre in terms of either diverging or illustrating their shared tradition. Moreover, I limit my scope to the recent Flemish and Dutch traditions as grounded in international tendencies and developments. As follows, this rather short and incomplete historical overview attempts only tentatively to frame how my objects of study have contributed to the history and development of music theatre.

Charting the development of music theatre throughout Western history poses its own problems and limitations. Music theatre’s origin, whether it began with Monteverdi’s Orfeo (1607) and the tradition of drama per musica, its first systematic theories by the Florentine Camerata in the 16th century or a century earlier with the intermidi in Italian Renaissance drama, has already been extensively debated by scholars of opera and history. As the first historical landmark in the history of music theatre, one usually refers to Monteverdi’s Orfeo (1607). However, earlier occurrences were Daphne and Euridice (for the wedding of Henry IV and Maria de Medici) established by the Camerata, a group of scientists and music lovers interested, among others, in the depiction of emotion by music. An earlier version of Orfeo was also recorded in 1474 by Angelo Poliziano. In giving reference to Nino Pirrotta, Peter Kivy dates the origins of music theatre back as early as the 15th century with the intermidi, which were musical interpolations between the dramatic acts sometimes sufficiently coherent in plot and character so that they can be regarded as a proper ‘play within a play’ (Kivy 1979: 23; see also Nino Pirrotta 1982). Consequently, Kivy speaks of an ‘evolution’ rather than an ‘invention’ of the genre.
However, if one would attempt to map music theatre’s traces from Baroque drama through its reformation by Pergolesi, the Italian opera seria/buffa, Mozart’s experiments with spoken dialogue and Singspiel, Rossini’s ‘bel canto’ comical operas, Gluck’s opera reformation, Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk up until the Brechtian epic opera and Zeitopera, Kurt Weill’s songspiel (Brecht’s pun on German Singspiel) or up until the twenty-first century with its occasionally non-operas and anti-operas, such historical mapping would disregard the particular differences which are so significant for music theatre and its relation to auditory distress in a history of listening. Such a history remains, as today, unwritten and would be virtually impossible to do so, even though opera and musical theatre have established fairly consistent forms and histories. Nonetheless, recent history of music theatre yet again compels a critical understanding of its definitions, even if an exhaustive definition has become impossible in view of its rich and dense history.

Composer and author in the field, Eric Salzman has referred to the difficulty of defining music theatre on numerous occasions. Instead of a definition primarily based on historical grounds or aesthetic categorisation, he proposes a more pragmatic approach that fits the present situation:

Music-theater has two contrary meanings. In one sense, it means any theatrical or performance work in which music plays an extended, primary role. In this definition, opera, operetta, and the musical are just localized forms of a large, general category. But, in English, music-theater is a relatively recent term coined to exclude all those traditional genres in favor of new kinds of music-and-theater mixes: antioperas, nonmusicals, performance art, multimedia, extended-voice extravaganzas, and the like (Salzman 2000: 9).

On the whole, Salzman distinguishes between an all-inclusive definition that functions as a portmanteau word or a ‘catchall’ encompassing opera, oratorio, operetta, musical theatre et al., and an exclusionary definition including various types of experimental work that fall in between the established traditions of music theatre:

At one end of this complex new-work spectrum, is experimental opera; at another is the serious, contemporary musical . . . In between is a large and growing third stream – music-theater in the exclusive, narrow sense – that has grown out of performance art and live multimedia (Salzman 1999: 1-2).

In the more specific, exclusive sense, Salzman points out that the term ‘music theatre’ came to denote “[t]he heretofore excluded middle ranges from chamber opera to experimental work (from nontraditional form and performance setting all the way to extended voice and performance art) to unconventional musicals coming out of the nonprofit and downtown theatre” (Salzman 2002: 64). In this way, the new term ‘music theatre’ assisted in a
process of self-naming, reflecting rather a politics of legitimacy where a new generation of composers and theatre groups had a need to define themselves as *not* serious opera, and not light-hearted musical (neither operetta, nor cabaret).

W. Anthony Sheppard (2001) stresses, on the contrary, the continuity of the term and defines the development of ‘modernist music theatre’ not only in terms of its exclusion but of breaking with genre distinctions:

> As a loose genre designation, ‘music theater’ is not simply a catchphrase recently concocted by historians of twentieth-century music. Variants of the term were employed earlier in the century, and the phenomenon was noted by many. Jean Cocteau was wise to describe the ‘new form’ of theatrical performance through negation or exclusion; attempting to detail exactly what music theater is or what criteria qualify a work for this designation would run counter to the broadly inclusive spirit signaled by the term. It may be wrong even to think of music theater as a genre, since so much twentieth-century art has been concerned with genre-blurring (Sheppard 2001: 3).

As Sheppard suggests, the blurring of distinct genres is an essential aspect of music theatre. This is also apparent in the performances I discuss, which are generally categorised as, among others, ‘musical narrative’ (*vertelconcert*, in Dutch), ‘concert installation’, ‘semi-scenic’ staging of operatic theatre, ‘non-linear opera’, etc. Though in these neologisms, music theatre signals its negation from the established ‘genres’ of theatre and opera, its multiple names make it difficult to categorise it as a discrete genre as such. This should not, however, render the contrary definitions, as proposed by Salzman, insufficient, since they relate to a more concrete practice of self-naming and legitimisation in relation to the tradition of music theatre.

Two ideas should be taken into account when considering this double sense of the term ‘music theatre’. On the one hand, the portmanteau definition, which covers all types of music theatre, was in certain contexts reserved to differentiate those performances that focused on the drama, the word or the verbal dialogue (like in *Singspiel* and *opera comique*) against opera that would favour lyrical expression (see Keuppens 2006). On the other hand, the more restrictive definition coincides with the socio-political developments of small-scale music theatre often in the nonprofit, state-subsidised sector, as a reaction against the big opera houses (which also attract large sums of state subsidy) and the sometimes even bigger, commercial musical halls. It is in this latter group of small-scale, ‘avant-garde’ music theatre that the tradition is often negated as a way to claim territory. Most of the objects of my case studies came about as part of the latter development of experimental music theatre, in particular the performances by Muziektheater Transparant, LOD and Walpurgis.

Significantly to music theatre’s recent history across international borders, performing artists and composers from the 1960s and 1970s such as Luciano
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Berio, Cathy Berberian, John Cage, Philip Glass, Alexander Goehr, Hans Werner Henze, Maurizio Kagel, Georges Aperghis, Luigi Nono and Peter Maxwell Davies reacted against the opera as an ‘institution’ in their musical-dramatic works, which lead to the appearance of the term ‘music theatre’ in the restrictive meaning. Salzman (2000) traces its origins (and confusion) by means of a problem of translation:

When the neologism *musictheater* was proposed in the 1960s, it sounded like a translation from the German – which it was. *Musiktheater* was widely used in central Europe in the sixties and seventies to designate experimental forms of interaction between the concert stage and the theater (see the works of Stockhausen, Kagel, Ligeti, Berio, Bussotti, etc.). In translation, it was intended to distinguish those kinds of musico-theatrical performance works that clearly did not belong in the opera house, the Broadway theater, or the traditional concert stage (9).

Earlier influences have been suggested, such as Arnold Schoenberg’s *Erwartung, Pierrot Lunaire* and *Die glückliche Hand*, Igor Stravinsky’s *Renard, A Soldier’s Tale/L’Histoire du soldat* and *Les Noces* (Sheppard 2001: 4). In the tradition of programmatic, symphonic orchestra music, one can add to such lists Edvard Grieg’s *Peer Gynt Suite* and Sergei Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*, which are both still often performed by youth orchestras or small ensembles – sometimes in experimental arrangements – that incorporate a narrator’s voice. During the 1970s and up until today, a new generation of composers have responded to this tradition with small-scale projects for chamber orchestra (‘chamber opera’) or mixed bands with brass and percussion, but often still within the classical idioms. In this tradition, we can situate Heiner Goebbels in Germany, Georges Aperghis in France, and Philip Glass and Stephen Sondheim in the United States.

The relatively small size of the projects as a defining feature allowed the composers to work more flexibly on a basis of *work-in-progress*, which was not possible in the opera houses that consumed both time and money. The international spirit also reached North America and especially New York, where the term ‘music theatre’ became a specific designation for musical theatre performances that defined themselves as different from Broadway productions, including the music hall style of singing. Some of the vocal performances in *La Didone* from the Wooster Group – which provides the case study in chapter two – could also be regarded in relation to the North American, *post-operatic* tradition of music theatre, which blurs the boundaries with musical styles of singing such as *belting* (a vibrato-type of singing).

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6 Keuppens (2006) suggests, in this respect, that the term ‘music theatre’ refers rather to an organisational form than a genre designation.
The issue of music theatre and its definition was taken up in the Netherlands by composers and theatre practitioners such as Willem Breuker, Louis Andriessen, Maurice Horsthuis, Jeff Hamburg and Dick Raaijmakers, who initially joined forces in the music theatre ensemble ‘Baal’ (1973-1988). This group came about as a response to the historical ‘Actie Tomaat’ (literally, “tomato coup”) in which students showed their antipathy of conventional, canonical, dramatic text-based theatre. Around the same time, Hauser Orkater (nowadays known as ‘Orkater’ with such spin-off groups as ‘De Mexicaanse Hond’ and ‘Susies Haarlok’) came into existence as a ‘multimedial’ music theatre. The name ‘Orkater’, a combination of ‘orchestra’ and ‘theatre’, reflects its hybrid form (Bobkova 1994: 175). Multimedia became an important feature of the music theatre in the second half of the twentieth century, as both the Baal and (Hauser) Orkater groups exemplify. In their artistic proclamations, these groups reacted vehemently against the large-scale musical and the Wagnerian opera that were seen by these experimental groups as “shabby staged concerts” (Schönberger 1988: 106). Influenced by Bertolt Brecht and the physical theatre (Jerzy Grotowski, the Living Theatre), they rediscovered the dramatic function of music in performances that would not be merely ‘stage music’. Auditory disturbances are integrally part of this aesthetic project that is generally defined by deliberate resistance and contrast. For this purpose, audio technology and electronics were introduced, as is similar to the works of Laurie Anderson and Meredith Monk in North-America of the 1980s up until today.

Music theatre in the Netherlands answered to an artistic need for differentiation and resistance to the old opera houses. Ironically, it was the counter-reaction by the Dutch Opera that (re-)claimed the catch-all definition in 1986 when it renamed itself “Het Muziektheater” with its opening of the new opera house next to the Amstel and the town hall in Amsterdam. The state-subsidised opera re-appropriated the self-naming trend to rejuvenate itself, which added perhaps even more to the confusion of terminology. The terminological confusion comes with a territorial struggle for legitimacy and institutionalisation. However, the resisting stream of music theatre gradually also found more stable grounds within the theatre. Recently, in 2004, Paul Koek founded the Veenfabriek in Leiden for such small-scale music theatre works that are not operatic but rather react to the theatre traditions. The

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7 The first performance was realised in 1972 under the name of ‘Hauser Kamerokest’. In 1980, the Hauser Orkater group came to an end. However, some of its members continued in different collaborations under different names such as ‘De Horde van Jim van der Woude’ (1981-1984), ‘De Mexicaanse Hond’ (1980 – to the present) and ‘Orkater’.

8 Paul Koek made a great contribution to the continuation of music theatre in the Netherlands, first for ZTV Hollandia, and is known for his pleas of breaking the boundaries between performers and musicians on stage. These groups are very much musically oriented with a balanced mix of speech, visual aesthetics, performance and nonsensical communication. They do not directly fall under the reach of my study, despite their relations with musical, text-based
Veenfabriek takes the relation between theatre and society as its primary concern of investigation through music and auditory means of communication, including mostly the use of popular idioms and rhythms. The theatre works of Paul Koek have also included the use of electronics by composers who move between the operatic and theatrical traditions, such as Yannis Kyriakides. In recent developments of through-composed experiments with electroacoustic music on both the opera and theatre stage, we can also include the work of Huba De Graaff, Michel van der Aa and Robert Zuidam.

In Belgium, similar developments occurred in the establishment of music theatre. Most of the small-scale music theatre ensembles were established in the 1980s, some as independent, others from within the opera houses and the ‘serious’ classical music. Gerard Mortier was the first to launch the movement ‘from opera to theatre’ in De Munt/La Monnaie in Brussels and later the Flemish Opera in Antwerp and Ghent (Keuppens 2006). This trend has been recently taken up again in both Flemish and Dutch opera houses by collaborating with theatre makers such as Jan Fabre, Gerardjan Rijnders, Ivo van Hove and Johan Simons. Up until today, small-scale music theatres such as LOD (originally ‘Muziektheater Lod’ since 1989, an abbreviation of “Lunch Op Donderdag”), Muziektheater Transparant (1994), and smaller groups such as Walpurgis (1989), Tirasila (1995) and Braakland/ZheBilding (1998) have a growing influence on the international development of music theatre, as also witnessed in the Netherlands and Germany. The growing influence of Muziektheater Transparant on mainstream opera, for instance, has led to various small-scale opera performances and collaborations (such as with Opera Mobile, the Flemish Opera and De Munt/La Monnaie). Many of these music theatre ‘houses’ support the creation of new music theatre works, such as by the composers in residence of LOD (Kris Defoort, Dick van der Harst, Jan Kuijken, Dominique Pauwels) and Muziektheater Transparant (Wim Hendericks, Peter Maxwell Davies, Jan Van Outryve, and Eric Sleichim). It was not until 1993 that they received state funding under the Decree for Stage Arts (‘Podiumkunstendecreet’). A separate category was established for music theatre, which was defined as “opera, operetta, musical and multidisciplinary art expressions”.

Theatre and audio culture. For the purpose of my study, I choose to look at those performances that take music as a primary means of expression and acoustic communication as far as this initiates in auditory distress in order to contest our modes of listening. I see, however, much reason to also extend the concepts of my study, such as ‘auditory distress’ and ‘aurality’, to their performances.

9 The Flemish Opera, De Munt/La Monnaie, the Royal Ballet of Flanders and commercialised musical were originally excluded from funding, though opera is generally funded as cultural institute. Today, there is a lot of public discussion as to whether musicals should also be subsidised. From 2009, for the first time, musical theatre such as Judas Theaterproductions and Musical van Vlaanderen (formerly known as Geert Allaert Productions and Music Hall) will be taken into consideration for structural subsidies allocated by the Department of Culture at the Ministry of the Flemish Community. Apart from LOD, Muziektheater Transparant and
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In other words, the history of what Salzman further calls ‘new’ music theatre – to mark the restrictive sense – is fairly recent, as young, evolving and still not well-defined form, hinging upon avant-garde traditions (like auditory distress, shock effect and re-integration of the senses). The development of music theatre comes together with the development of nonlinear, nonverbal forms of performance art such as the earlier mentioned ‘post-dramatic theatre’. Consequently, most small-scale music theatre attracts only a select audience, privileging the individual listener. It has therefore often been exposed to scrutiny as it comes to matters of funding and public interest. This exclusive position of the listener, however, makes it highly valuable for studying the role of music and audio theatre as a place of contestation and transformation of our listening culture. As a type of theatre in so many different forms, it has always been under the pressure of reaction against older, obsolete forms, as Salzman (2000) comments:

Ever since its invention in Italy in 1600, opera has been constantly reinvented as music-theater—*dramma per musica*—because opera has always threatened to become, well, too operatic: too old, too showy, too devoted to its past, too removed from the concerns of its time. And, above all, too obsessed with *voce*, *voce*, *voce*. It is curious that somehow opera manages to be simultaneously too aristocratic and too popular, as well as too social, too outrageous, too bogged down in the status quo, too expensive, and too starstruck. Hence the long series of reforms […] (10).

As Salzman suggests, a history of music theatre should be understood as a chain of reactions, resistances, reinventions and reforms, rather than a homogeneous development. As such, most twentieth century music theatre can be regarded, in essence, as a reaction against nineteenth century ‘bourgeois’ opera. Within this tradition, Wagner’s realisation of music drama – he calls it *Wort-Ton* drama – as modelled by the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* was itself already a reformation of the tradition. Through this model, he defined the drama as primarily constituted through the music and re-positioned the listener in a new concept of the auditorium. Its apparatus and acoustic design, however, were devised to fade out the auditory disturbances of industrial life outside the auditorium under the guarantee of persistent aural pleasure. Within the twentieth century context and interest for the growing Walpurgis, several more ensembles receive structural funding for music theatre (2006/08-2009), such as: Braakland/ZheBilding (founded 1998), Figuren Theater De Spiegel (1993), Art House Pantalone (1999), Compagnie KAIET! (2003) and Van Zilver Papier en Spiegeltjes (2005). After its last project subsidy in 2006, Tirasila (1995) has had no further activity. Text-based theatre Ensemble Leporello (1986) also makes a type of music theatre in terms of rhythmised performances with musicians and vocalists. A newly established ensemble, Service to Others (Het Verbond) by film and theatre maker Wayn Traub, is promising to influence the development of music theatre as multimedia performance. For more information see the text by Veerle Keuppens (2006) on the website of the Flemish Theatre Institute (VTI).
aural complexity, this ‘auditory distress’ became aesthetically, emancipatory and politically significant. The acoustic intervention became a strategy of avant-garde movements to break with the traditional models. The Wagnerian music theatre apparatus was then no longer sufficient.

Nonetheless, the conceptual idea and staging practice of the Gesamtkunstwerk lives forth in its many recuperations of integrating the senses by some form of ‘total theatre’. Salzman suggests this in 1974, when he defines the at the time newly developing music theatre as “a loosely applied term for theater works or events that involve some merging of arts, forms, techniques, means, and electronic media, all directed at more than one of the senses and generally involving some kind of total surrounding” (Salzman 1974; qtd. in Sheppard 2001: 5).10 In this broad definition, today’s music theatre unmistakably carries some of the myths of the Wagnerian ‘artwork of the future’, but not without the critical and destabilising intervention of what I will conceptualise as ‘auditory distress’. The objects and examples of my study will help me to further conceptualise this destabilisation of such a concept as ‘total music theatre’, to which I will return in the epilogue to this study.

2. Auditory Distress as a Conceptual Basis for a New Approach

The complex developments of music theatre make it significant to look at how this newly ‘becoming’ art form addresses present-day audiences, specifically in what it does to the listener. The first example of De Overstroming already presented a notable impression of the way this music theatre addresses the listener by offering an excess of intensities and potential meanings through music. I want to argue that this excess produces an effect of ‘auditory distress’ on the listener.

The swift and agitated musical phrases in Kuijken’s half-improvised music concealed a sense of distress that made me interpret my musical experiences in relation to Peter Handke’s story. The darkness and emptiness of the stage only intensified my freely ‘flooding’ associations in terms of mental images and possible narrative threads, inferred from the story. This supported my impression that the music was narrating something quite similar to the story, and my feeling of distress was key to this idea. At the same time, the music presented me with a limit to my narrative interpretations since it left me fumbling and groping in the same darkness of the blind brother in Handke’s story as to the validity of the narration that I conceived in my mind. The scepticism of the blind brother filled me with critical doubt about my imaginative efforts to interpret the music as a narrative. If music cannot be narrative by itself, I asked myself: How can I have a sense that something is

being told through music? This question brought me to the hypothesis that music can only become narrative as a response in listening that brings resolution to the excess. The emptiness of the stage – and thereby, what I call its ‘visual deprivation’ – intensified this response in my perception.

From these experiences in *De Overstroming*, I deduce my main thesis: Sound – including music or any other sound experience in the theatre – produces a level of auditory distress. This distress calls for a response in the listener with which she or he tries to control the auditory distress. I argue that this reaction forms the basis of each auditory perception. In the listener’s response, then, processes of signification – like the inference of a narrative development in *De Overstroming* – play a considerable role. As such, perception and signification cannot be understood as separate from each other. I propose therefore to carefully investigate the responses of the listener to auditory distress in different music theatre performances. Once a response is established and conceptualised, I focus specifically at how this response contributes to meaningful listening experiences in the theatre. I thereby assert that the listener’s response is key to an understanding of what is at stake in these music theatre performances.

My hypothesis that auditory distress always plays a significant role in how we experience music theatre (or any operatic form for that matter) also sheds light on the tradition of music theatre. Traditional opera or music drama, especially in the vein of Wagner’s model, was construed in such a way that it did not confront the listener with an awareness of the distress created by the music. Rather, the listener’s auditory experience was supporting a narrative, a dramatic action, a sense of coherency or synthesis between the different elements, etc. which would channel the distress and make it unperceived as such. The music theatre I discuss disrupts the evident mechanisms that would compensate the auditory distress. In this way, this music theatre highlights particular qualities in the sound or music that cause awareness for the distress in listening. Auditory distress marks a certain uncontrollability of sound within the otherwise controlled space of the theatre.

The listener’s awareness of this uncontrollability of sound also affects her or his individual responses, which are – needless to say – subjective, and in most cases unnoticed. However, theatre also has its own in-built strategies to direct the listener’s attention and assist in the ways she or he deals with the uncontrollable and disturbing qualities of sound. Traditionally, theatre always creates perspectives for the spectator with regard to how theatrical objects and events are represented on stage, but also how the spectator perceives them. Apart from such perspectives that catches the eye’s attention, theatre also always includes a number of perspectives for the ear that do not only derive from the distinct acoustics of the physical theatre space, but also influence the way the listener perceives and interprets the sounds and music. I will argue that such perspectives in listening might well be predisposed by a text through
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focalization as a very specific perspective. Listening perspectives might then well be embedded in a narrative or dramatic development, in speech and action, in the spatial arrangement of the stage and its frame, etc.

In conventional forms of music theatre and opera, these perspectives help us to ‘immerse’ ourselves in the drama and forget about the confines of the theatrical situation or our physical position in the auditorium. The theatrical perspective operates then through our distance to the stage, which is brought nearer through these mechanisms. Music theatre today, however, does not provide easy solutions through its perspectives to compensate for the auditory distress in our responses.

As *De Overstroming* shows, the juxtaposition of text, image and music resists a unified experience that would fixate meanings and intensify the drama in a unilateral way. The music was only one part in this structure, imposing its auditory distress on the listener, urging the listeners to find a meaningful structure themselves. It was only during and even after the performance that this juxtaposition started to mould together gradually in my imagination, stimulating associations and connections, giving me some promise of closure while reproducing the excess of the ‘flood’ of which the story goes. The performance rather mystified these connections in its staging, than that it gave an unambiguous frame of interpretation. I compensated this lack of a frame with the point of view from the story: the blind brother guided me a way out of this flood of sounds. The perspective of the blind brother could therefore also serve as a perspective for the listening experience. It gave me a ‘point of listening’ or a ‘point of audition’ (Chion 1994). This listening perspective gave me direction in my responses to deal with the auditory distress that the music caused. It directed my attention in search of some narrative development, which I compared to Peter Handke’s story.

In order to understand how auditory distress in today’s music theatre plays upon the listener’s competences to respond in listening, and how these responses contribute to meaningful auditory experiences, we need a theoretical framework that includes both theories of sound perception and signification. The aim of this framework is the analysis of the specific address/response relations of the listener in a mode of relating to the sounds and music in a performance. The models of analysis in Theatre Studies and Musicology, which mutually contribute to the study of music theatre, have, however, been developed in relation to more traditional forms of dramatic theatre and opera. The main enquiry in my study is therefore to critically examine existing theories and concepts that can help to describe the workings of music theatre in relation to the listener’s auditory experiences in the post-modern paradigm.

Time-honoured scholarship of semiotics (and semiology) in both Musicology and Theatre Studies has established particular sets of tools to describe music as a sign in relation to an analysable ‘text’. These semiotic models, which were mostly developed during the 1970s have treated the study
of both music and theatre as a largely philological enterprise, grounded in linguistics. In traditional theatre, music and sound can be studied in relation to the other constituents of a performance, which establish a certain theatrical ‘code’ or ‘text’ that can be analysed, or even ‘decoded’. The semiotic tradition (including Kowzan 1975, Pavis 1976, Ubersfeld 1977, Elam 1980, Fischer-Lichte 1983, and Esslin 1988) then allows one to analyse the auditory ‘system’ in the text of the performance descriptively in terms of signs of emotion, action, dramatic impact, musical puns, underscoring, framing, etc. A sociosemiotic approach (Bryant-Bertail 1990) would add the significance of the socio-cultural context as implied in, for instance, ‘genre’, which brings in its own iconic relations and cultural associations with a piece of music or a sound. This theatre semiotic tradition focuses on the ‘inherent’ meanings of signs and the receiver’s recognition of the intent that leads to the judgment of a given semiotic object or relation between objects. In a more dynamic model for semiotic analysis, Patrice Pavis (1996) has drawn attention to ‘vectors’ between signs that suggest a relative mobility of meanings relative to the spectator’s attention. Most of these semiotic approaches, however, do not explain why a given object or event is interpreted as a sign in the spectator’s perception. Most of the models presuppose that mostly everything in the theatre, intentionally or not, has a meaning in relation to one another in a dense but exhaustive network.

The theatre semiotic approach generally influenced the systematic reflection on sound design in the theatre (as described in many manuals in theatre practice and stage design, like Kaye and LeBrecht 1992). This approach generally treats sound or music then in terms of ‘effects’ on an audience in relation to text and scenic action. Jon Whitmore’s (1994) analysis of aural sign systems in post-modern theatre, for instance, provides an example of how theatre makers can think of sound and music in terms of their function in the play. Whitmore’s semiotic angle on how the use of sound and music communicates the performance’s meanings does not bear much information about the listening act as such, nor explains the reasons why the listener attributes meaning to sounds other than that it belongs to the overall expectation in the signifying system of the theatre. Whitmore also explains how music can affect the impact of the dramatic action on the emotional experience of the audience, but he therefore limits his discussion of the function of sound to a dramatic tradition where text and action are the primary carriers of meaning. When Whitmore does refer on one occasion to the distressing nature of sound that can ‘enrage’ the emotions and ‘assault’ the psyche of the spectators by such effects as reinforcement, distortion, disharmony, the disturbance becomes rather a dramaturgical strategy that aims at “an aural stretching of the audience’s horizon of expectations” (Whitmore 1994: 189-90). I contend, however, that auditory distress is not merely a
strategy with a premeditated effect, but that it belongs to every auditory experience in the theatre.

In semiological theories of music, structures of musical signifiers and signifieds are generally analysed through their notations in a written score (see Karbusicky 1990, Monelle 1992, Tarasti 1995). The study of Musicology has developed its own instrumentarium for music analysis that focuses primarily on a written score. In opera scholarship too, the author’s intents are traditionally studied in the score and libretto, which has historical validity in relation to the particular performance practice of a given opera. Evidently, opera has its own history, its own conventions and therefore, its own scholarly literature, which is traditionally grounded in musicology. Yet the semiotic study of music has given too much importance to musical notation. With the advent of newly developing forms of music theatre, there is a need for new approaches in opera criticism and scholarship (which has also been fairly underrepresented in many academic libraries). Therefore, there have been many singular attempts of new research on musical performance and opera within musicological scholarship that embrace topical issues such as hybridity, performativity, multimedia, intermediality, etc. (see Cook 1990, Levinson 1990). However, apart from these new impulses, such as in music-ethnographical research and the literary-minded ‘New Musicology’ (McClary 1991, Kramer 2002), the study of the ‘performative’ aspects in new forms of opera and music theatre still needs expansion.

During the past thirty years, musicologists have been contributing to the theoretical debate and scholarship of traditional music theatre with, among others, the establishment of opera theory as a discrete discipline. Opera theory has opened the way for new approaches that encompass philosophical and conceptual considerations into the critical study of the score, the libretto and the staging in conjunction with one another (see, for instance, Kivy 1979, Abbate 2001, Levin 2007). One development in this direction is the welcoming of issues such as narrativity and narration in music that go beyond the idea of meaning as verbal paraphrase (see Cone 1974, Newcomb 1987, Nattiez 1990, Neubauer 1997, Wolf 2002, Rabinowitz 2004, Tarasti 2004, Meelberg 2006). These new developments have enabled to inquire why the perceiver creates meaning, rather than analysing musical or acoustic signs descriptively and systematically according to given semiotic models.

11 Today, the many forms and rapid developments of (new) music theatre calls for international discussion and reflection, such as provided by NewOpNonOp initiated by Dragan Klaic (TIN) and Lukas Pairon (Walpurgis, Ictus) in 1992. I had the privilege of sharing my questions and expertise in theatre studies with musicologists in various discussion groups such as the IFTR/FIRT Music Theatre Working Group (from 2004, in respectively St. Petersburg, Washington, Portsmouth and Helsinki), the AG Musik-Theater der Gesellschaft für Theaterwissenschaft (at the Hellerau Festival in Dresden in 2006), the many ASCA meetings, reading groups, the Research Colloquium of Theatre Studies and the Collegium Musicologum at the University of Amsterdam.
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However, performance analysis within opera theory still requires further development. Although contemporary music theatre as my object of study is in many ways different to opera, operatic scholarship can be taken further for the purpose of analysis of (new) music theatre. I therefore adopt some of opera theory’s concerns to focus on music theatre as a performance of music in the first place, taking the sounding score as I have experienced the performance acoustically – and not its notated form – as my primary object. By taking the listener’s responses to ‘auditory distress’ as my main focus, I also detach any musicological debate of the aesthetic claims and subjective definitions of what music is from what the auditory experiences in music theatre actually do to the listener. Music is foremost discussed for its sounding qualities that could cause auditory distress, alongside other manifestations of sound, noise, infra/ultrasound or even silence. In this way, I wish to do justice to this newly becoming music theatre that has embraced many other sonorities and auditory structures that surpass the purely ‘musical’ for performative purposes. The performative ‘moment’ then defines the compelling urge of the listener to respond to auditory distress.

The theoretical framework that is needed for such a performance analysis of music theatre should connect theories of perception and listening to a semiotic approach that provides a critical perspective on how and why the listener produces meaningful experiences. In relation to the traditional approaches to opera and music, I propose my study of the listener’s responses to auditory distress in music theatre as complementary to the theoretical developments in both theatre studies and musicology for at least two reasons. On the one hand, my approach attempts to offer an answer to the need for theoretical concepts that are adequate to discuss the practice and workings of music theatre today in relation to the modern listener’s modes of listening. In doing so, I examine theoretical concepts that have often emerged from visual and literary theories, not as exclusively different but rather in relation to them. I discuss the ‘aural’ concepts from within their respective theories and disciplines as heuristic tools for the application to my objects in contemporary music theatre. In this way, I investigate how music theatre works in its particular address of the spectator-listener and her or his acts of listening. On the other hand, I contribute to the theoretical discussion of sound in contemporary theatre with a wider scope of audio culture and, what I will call, ‘aurality’. 12

12 My notion of ‘aurality’ aims to distinguish itself from Walter Ong’s (1988) understanding of orality and oral culture as opposed to literacy and literate culture. Based on Marshall McLuhan’s distinction of oral and literate societies, Ong defines an oral culture as one where people are unfamiliar with reproducing language in a written form. He then opposes a primary oral culture to the literate world where one is caught up in writing and print. Ong recognises within the modern literate world a tendency of second orality which is dominated by a growth of electronic modes of communication (telephone, television, radio, etc.). The term orality, however, suggests a close connection to the ‘oral’ production of sound for the sake of language.
listening, including our competence(s) and culture(s) in listening. Aurality should however not be mistaken for ‘audibility’. ‘Aurality’ together with ‘audition’ should rather be regarded as complementary to visuality and vision in Jonathan Crary’s understanding of our changing modes of perception and subjectivity.

For this purpose, an approach is needed that combines perception theories with theories of semiosis and cultural discourse. My study therefore adopts theories of the subject in relation to perception and signification (Barthes & Havas 1973, Connor 1997/2000, Crary 1999) that are fruitful for the discussion of cultural discourse (Silverman 1983/1988). My study further adopts a prosperous interdisciplinary approach by looking at concepts from a plethora of disciplines, such as soundscape analysis (Schafer 1977, Truax 1984, van Leeuwen 1999), sound in film theory (Doane 1980, Chion 1983/1994), media theory and audio culture history (Kittler 1993, de Kerckhove 1997, Kahn 1994/2001, Bull & Back 2003, Cox & Warner 2004), phenomenology and perception theories (Ihde 1976, Maconie 1990, Rodaway 1994, Connor 1997/2000), psychoacoustics and psychology (Forrester 2000, Cytowic 1993, Sacks 2007), as well as narratology (Bal 1985, Abbott 2002, Fludernik 1996, Jahn 2001, etc.) as far as they help me to conceptualise the listener in relation to her or his discursive responses in listening. Innovative in this approach is the perspective of auditory distress as a primarily sonorous manifestation in the listener, which has a physical, cognitive and psychological basis. This new approach, however, remains within the confines of the humanities and therefore limits its argumentation to a critical appraisal of the above-mentioned theories and disciplines for the purpose of discussing the case studies, which I will treat as examples or illustrations of the discussed concepts. The argument about auditory distress underlying this study focuses in the first place on the act of listening as a complex cognitive mechanism to respond to the distress, and in the second place as a discursive practice of reading and interpreting the auditory experiences in music theatre performances.

In summary, the notion of auditory distress as a conceptual departure point helps me to explain how we relate to sounds and music in the theatre, which are initially marked by some kind of disturbance or intervention on our senses and cognition. As I will elaborate on further, this disturbance is caused by an excess of intensities due to an essential insufficiency between hearing and listening. This insufficiency is often intensified by a visually deprived context.
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in the theatre. In such a context, one sense (modality) is usually isolated and intensified in relation to the other senses. To give an example from De Overstroming, the intensification is realised by darkening the stage in a black-box theatre context. This visual deprivation is also literally thematised in Handke’s story by the perspective of the blind brother. In contrast to this lack of visual stimuli, the title could refer to the excess of images that the narrating brother conveys. The excess is also realised in the performance through the many associations the listener can make with Kuijken’s improvisational style of composing based on the images in the narration. Through both lack and excess of stimuli, the listener feels compelled to respond to the excess by channelling the sensory information, selecting what is necessary for interpretation, and rendering her or his auditory experiences meaningful.

For the purpose of analysing the listener’s responses, I look at the auditory experiences in terms of modes of relation, in which I distinguish three types of response: the modes of listening (chapter two), narrativisation (chapter three) and auditory imagination (chapter four). As I will argue, the process of relating by means of the listener’s responses is ‘managed’ by the particular perspectives in the performance, including focalization, such as the perspective of the blind brother in De Overstroming. This management implies a crucial questioning of the agency of the listener, as it attributes a certain authority to sound within the performance’s structure of address. Additionally, I will argue that the act of listening is predominantly embedded in a cultural discourse shared by other listeners in the audience that constitutes a community in listening. This discourse has shaped the way the listener responds, makes sense of, and thereby, positions oneself as listening subject in relation to the auditory distress. Therefore, by studying the listener’s responses, the workings of music theatre on listening reveal how these performances act upon their own, contemporary cultural discourse.

3. Outlining the Research

In the first chapter, “Auditory Distress: Interventions of Sound”, I state that auditory distress forms the basis of listening. I will argue that this distress stems from a necessary intervention of sound in surpassing certain thresholds of exposure in an acoustic horizon, and in the ear, in order to address the listener. In this penetrating nature of sound, I conceptualise the listener’s address as marked by a level of uncontrollability in relation to the auditory environment. This uncontrollability results in a crisis of the listener as interpreting subject. The crisis then stimulates the listener to solve the disturbance, channel the intensities, make sense of the listening experience, and ultimately, control the distress. Auditory distress as a signal for the uncontrollability of sound invites us then to look at the listener’s capacity (i.e. ‘aural competency’), or sometimes insufficiency to respond to the distress.
This is primarily an issue of agency. As such, the concept of auditory distress generates a central question about the agency of the listener as ‘subject’ in relation to the ‘authoritative’ power of sound that calls for the listener’s response.

In order to conceptualise a notion of the subject in relation to listening, I will refer to the idea of the ‘acoustic mirror’ in early infancy, which describes how the child constitutes a sense of auditory ‘self’ in relation to the enveloping sound of the mother. This so-called ‘sonorous envelope’ finds subsequent representations in music and music theatre, which can cause both a sense of pleasure and auditory distress to the listener due to its qualities of excess. The distress is usually intensified in the theatre by its context of sensory – often visual – deprivation. As an illustration of this mechanism, I will connect the concept of visual deprivation to Jean-Paul Sartre’s description of an *acoustic* or *auditory gaze*, which helps me to explain how sound as intervention can draw attention to the auditory distress that is inherent to every sound. Auditory intervention then marks the crisis of the auditory subject, which can make the listener aware of her or his role in the responses to the auditory distress in order to solve this crisis. As a significant consequence, the listener feels an urge to position her or himself due to the unbalancing effect that auditory distress creates. I wish to argue that the listener’s position plays an important function in making the auditory experience into something meaningful. In this way, the response to auditory distress involves a discursive position that arises in relation to an ‘acoustic community’ to which the listener relates in listening.

In chapter two, “The Listener’s Response: Modes of Listening and Perspective”, I continue on this impact of auditory distress that unbalances the listener as a listening subject by an insufficiency inherent to the relation between (passive) hearing and (active) listening, such as Paul Rodaway (1994) formulates: “Hearing may be described as the basic passive sensation, whilst listening implies an active attentiveness to auditory information and a desire to establish meaning” (89). I will demonstrate how this unsteady relation between hearing and listening calls for a management of our attention in the theatre. I will point to the significance of perspectives in the theatre in managing the listening attention. As a first response to these perspectives that influence our perception of auditory distress, I introduce the modes of listening, as discussed in Schafer’s Soundscape Analysis and Truax’s Acoustic Communication studies, enriched by Chion’s studies of the film soundtrack and Barthes’s philosophical reflections on psychoanalytic listening with ‘evenly hovering attention’.

Central to this discussion is a critique of Stockfelt’s ‘ideal’ modes of listening, suggesting an aural competence by the listener. Despite the resonances with Schafer’s pleas for *sonological competence* through ear-cleaning exercises, her theoretisations help me to conceptualise the listening
modes in terms of a continuum that continuously shifts between these modalities:

An analysis must therefore begin from such shifts between modes of listening […]
Hence we must develop our competence reflexively to control the use of, and the shifts between, different modes of listening to different types of sound events (Stockfelt 2004: 92).

In order to anchor these modes of listening – which foremost refer to our daily experiences – in our experiences of the theatre, Jonathan Crary’s approach to the modes of perception and the cultural practice of managing attention offers the conceptual link. His approach might be different from my argument. However, his argument about how all experience is embedded in a specific cultural-historical context, which is mediated in the ways our attention are managed through perspectives, is very helpful to conceptualise ‘attention’ in relation to the modes of listening. According to his argument, our information-saturated world has turned our ears and our capacities of ‘paying attention’ conscientiously into “a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli” (Crary 1999: 1). I conceptualise this necessary act of filtering out ‘unnecessary’ auditory stimuli through the modes of listening, depending on the way we move our attention as our personal and subjective ‘tentacle’ with which we spatially control auditory distress. I then look at these modes in relation to the given perspectives in the theatre in great detail, and show how we switch between them in relation to the perspectives in looking and listening, which call upon the necessity of a frame of reference. One example is the messy intertwining of reduced, causal and acousmatic listening modes in a ‘schizophrenic’ listening situation, which offers a perspective that is based on a fundamental split between sound and its source. Similar to the earlier idea of auditory gazing, this split urges the listener to move her or his attention in search for linkages in the performance that would anchor the sounds, resulting in a plethora of listening modes. This listening situation illustrates that, when a stable frame is lacking, the continuous switching between modes of listening can cause an impasse in the listener.

Once the connection between the listening subject and the modes of attention is established, I further investigate two specific responses towards the auditory interventions in the following chapters, respectively narrativisation, and auditory imagination, as particular coping mechanisms against the uncontrollable ‘danger’ of sound.

In chapter three, “The Narrative Response: Narrativisation and Focalization”, I take the concept of narrativisation and redefine it as a most compelling mode of listening that can help the listener to solve the impasse between perception and interpretation. Through the notions of musicalisation (as a ‘post-dramatic’ principle) and vocal distress, among others, I
demonstrate how a narrative mode of listening can work as a coping mechanism in relation to the excess in listening that materialises in a semiotic remainder. For this purpose, I need to redefine the notions of narrative and narrativity in the traditional narratological models. My investigation of narrative theories – especially the psychological and cognitive approaches – help me further to discuss narrativisation as a particular semiotic mode of listening that helps the listener to create coherency and structure in her or his auditory experiences.

I conceptualise narrativisation further as a result of the listener’s way of positioning oneself in listening. I contend that this positioning can be contained by focalization as one specific perspective, which can extend from a text to the performance. This perspective generates then a narrative impulse in the listener to interpret the music narratively as a specific response to auditory distress. Due to the earlier claimed insufficiency of listening and music’s inability to really narrate anything specific, narrativisation seeks relations to other elements in the performance. Narrativity, in this sense, should be understood as an applied narrativity to complete the musical experience. The role of a programme brochure prior to or after the experience, for instance, can be highly significant for generating a narrative impulse in the listener to narrativise the events, even when the performance appears to suspend any apparent narrative development. In relation to music theatre’s paradoxical relation to narrativity, I discuss two pairs of related modes to which the notion of narrativisation could supply a new perspective: a concert or recital mode versus a representational mode, and an oral versus a literate mode of listening. These pairs show how, despite the opacity of a medium such as music, the listener can still feel an urge to narrativise the auditory events in relation to the general representation or to text on stage.

Chapter four, “The Imaginative Response: Auditory Imagination and Spatialisation”, discusses auditory imagination as a third possible response by the listener to auditory distress. In order to understand its distinctive role, I compare this notion to narrativisation as they both contribute to a sense of coherency and order, which relate to a sense in the listener of being a unified subject. There is reason to believe that narrativisation is part of auditory imagination. However, more traditional definitions of imagination would also suggest differences in terms of structuring perception through cognition and memory. As opposed to the homogenising effect of narrativisation, auditory imagination has been too narrowly conceptualised as a disturbance to our inner thoughts, an echo of musical phrases in our auditory memories. In contrast to the existing theories, I propose a more wide-ranging notion of auditory imagination that encompasses our faculty to form mental images and bring coherence into our perceptions.

By way of conceptualising how the workings of the imagination are emphasised on stage, I demonstrate how the construct of the theatre can be
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seen as an extension of our cognitive processes: as ‘theatre of the mind’ it reflects our imagination. I show how the opacity of music makes the listener aware of the construct that extends these cognitive processes. As such, this music theatre demonstrates how it operates as a metaphor for the imagination with its sometimes deceptive, homogenising workings. At the core of this discussion is the influence of visual deprivation and sonorous envelope in creating an embodied or ‘haptic’ sense of space in relation to one’s own body. I then illustrate how the sonorous envelope can stimulate an imaginative response in the listener to create an imaginary space as a response to the power of auditory distress to destabilise a sense of self. I argue that spatialisation should then be understood as a specific response of the imagination to create coherence, besides the representations of space in the performance, the sounds or the music.

Chapter five, “Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre”, forms an epilogue to these chapters, opening up the discussion to how music theatre, with its relation to auditory distress, operates in the wider framework of aurality and the politics of listening today. In this final chapter, I take up the discussion of music theatre’s relation to Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk and relate it to Artaud’s visions on the active role of the spectator in the theatre (see also the main epigraph to this study). Three recurrent features of contemporary music theatre, which came up during my investigations, are essential to this discussion: dissociation (as part of the split perceptions), fragmentation (in space and subject) and the authority of sound versus the agency of the (competent) listener.

I will conclude this discussion with the listener’s self-awareness and introspection as listening subject called upon by the auditory interventions, instigating a lack of control and a sense of semiotic remainder in the act of listening. By referring back to Stockfelt’s earlier assumptions, namely that “we must develop our own reflexive consciousness and competence as active ‘idle listeners’” (Stockfelt 2004: 93), I examine the significance of such concerns in the workings of music theatre today, when this type of theatre creates self-criticism about its construct, opacity and mediality in producing meaningful auditory experiences that relate to our present-day aural culture.

4. Unsettling the Case Studies

The relevance of the selected performances, first of all, is to be located in the position they take against the tradition of opera and music drama in unsettling, contesting and highlighting different aspects of our modes of listening. Rather than choosing one type of music theatre, I have selected a plethora of performance styles that use sound as their central critical strategy. In this sense, the diversity in form between these performances reflects the history of resistance towards a definition of ‘music theatre’, as I argued earlier, because
of its ‘unsettling’ relation towards theatre and opera histories. Second, the performances serve as paradigmatic examples of certain models of experience as they are chosen for the extremity in their experimentation with sound and music as the primary means to activate and often contest our modes of relation in listening as a response to auditory distress. By way of introducing the case studies, I wish to frame them in their respective traditions and characteristics in order to show how each of these objects demands significant shifts of attention in our theoretical approach to them. By means of the arguments, themes and concepts introduced above, I wish to show how each of my case studies exemplifies these shifts of attention in recent theoretical developments.

In chapter one, I first introduce an interactive installation, David Rokeby’s *n-Cha(n)t* (2001), which I then compare to a recent music theatre performance to demonstrate the implications of such concepts as ‘acoustic community’ and the ‘sonorous envelope’ (the wrap-around effect of sound). The performance is Josse De Pauw’s *Ruhe* (2007-2008) for Muziektheater Transparant, which combines texts from the literary novel “De SS-ers” (*The SS Men*) by Armando and Sleutelaar, with songs from Franz Shubert, sung live by the Collegium Vocale of Ghent. The use of music in this performance can be regarded within a recent development of ‘post-dramatic’ theatre as formulated by Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999). Because of its ambiguity, Lehmann regards music as an integral part of a larger project in theatre to break with the confines of an obvious, linear, goal-oriented or teleological structure. In what he terms “post-dramatic” theatre – a term that has now been generally accepted in theatre studies – Lehmann discusses musicalisation as a strategy in this project, which could expand to other elements in the performance, or to its whole organisation.

Based on a lecture by Helene Varopoulou (1998), the idea of musicalisation gives way to the metaphor of ‘theater as music’. In musicalisation, Lehmann finds a different way of structuring theatrical communication that breaks free from the confines of ‘logocentrism’ (the word as centre of attention), causality and *telos* (purposefulness), as constitutive for dramatic theatre. It therefore serves as a dramaturgical strategy to unsettle dramatic, narrative, linear structures that aim at one, culminating point (like ‘catharsis’ in the tradition of dramatic theatre). Similarly in *Ruhe*, musicalisation of text and stage purposefully disconnects the elements that produce meaning, and unsettles the narratives told by former SS officers that argue for National Socialism. It startles the listener and shows that nothing is as it first appears.

Lehmann conceptualises musicalisation as a critical strategy in post-dramatic theatre to explain today’s many cross-fertilisations of musical performance with text-based theatre. Though based on a tradition of musical drama, *La Didone* (2007-2009) by The Wooster Group can be regarded as an example of this strategy, as I discuss in chapter two. The performance
includes the baroque opera or, as it was then called, ‘dramma per musica’ under the same title by Francesco Cavalli in 1641. It was programmed as experimental opera during the opera festival ‘Operadagen Rotterdam’. In this staging, the original music drama was, however, overlayed with the cult science fiction film *Terrore Nello Spazio* (1965) from Mario Bava, better known as the *Planet of the Vampires*. The ancient story of Dido constantly switches back and forth with the story of American astronauts fighting against an invisible enemy on the planet Aura, as if both worlds were running parallel to each other in time. The juxtaposition went hand in hand with a bombardment of sound effects taken from the science fiction movie, blips and beeps that kept playing with the listener’s modes of attention. Though staged in the context of an opera festival, The Wooster Group is not generally known for making opera or music theatre. Rather, it relates to a post-dramatic theatre paradigm of intricately layered soundscapes that cut through the text as part of their dramaturgical investigations. In an indirect way, the approach of The Wooster Group breaks with a tradition of sound designs in the theatre where sound was only ‘added’ as long as it did not ‘disturb’ the drama as expressed through text or speech. In *The Wooster Group’s La Didone*, the disturbing quality of sound is highlighted.

Historically in dramatic theatre, playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov or Samuel Beckett were very conspicuous about the use of sound and music for purposes such as framing, underscoring, transitional effects or specific cues such as ambience. Text-based theatre primarily made use of the human voice as the primary medium of meaning. The use of musical instruments and sound-effects in drama has a long tradition of underscoring, commenting or adding comical effect, under which most often ideas of ‘realistic’ representation suffered. The acoustic spaces of many theatres are

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13 See Kaye and LeBrecht (1992) for a brief overview of functions that have been intentionally ascribed to the sound design in theatre. In their normative view, sound should not intervene with the text, unless one seeks a more stylistic approach, abstracting from a reality or conveying an absurd/surrealistic effect. Kaye and LeBrecht generally call for a balanced sound design in favour of some realistic notion: “Some of these sounds can become obtrusive, and placing them in an ambiance could be inappropriate” (Kaye & LeBrecht 1992: 26). In this study I will illustrate that sound is by definition always obtrusive, and that the realistic notion in the representation of sound is cultural-historically defined by conventions in the listener’s discourse and aurality.

14 In a letter dated 19 August 1883 in Gossensass, Tirol, Henrik Ibsen demands that in order to receive his permission to perform ‘Ghosts’ in Christiania, the play should not be accompanied by an orchestra, “neither before the performance, nor between the acts” (Samlede Verker XVII, p.521ff). Likewise in the Russian naturalist tradition, music was seen as the enemy of the word. Anton Chekhov’s letters are known for its criticism about Stanislavsky’s efforts to create atmospheres to support the drama. Chekhov was not too fond of the use of theatrical tricks and sound effects, such as the offstage sounds of dogs barking, birds singing, frogs croaking, etc. In the twentieth century, there has also been much controversy about the stagings of Samuel Beckett’s plays. Jon Whitmore (1994) describes how JoAnne Akalaitis’s production of
ideally fine-tuned for the purpose of carrying and mediating the sound of a voice to the spectator in ideal circumstances that would not disturb this mediation. Post-dramatic theatre, however, marks an important shift in the role of music and sound for the theatrical communication than its tradition allowed for. The Wooster Group consciously disrupts this dramatic tradition by making the music not only the ‘soundtrack’ of the film narrative, but also by overlayering it in acoustic excess, which frustrates the spectator’s insistence to follow the narratives.

In post-dramatic theatre, combinations of text and music often have such a self-critical and destabilising impact on the creation of a narrative by the listener such, as I observe in De Overstroming (2002) and De Helling van de Oude Wijven (2002-2003), as discussed in chapter three. Lehmann (1997) connects musicalisation to the issue of narration: it can be used as a strategy to create an ‘auditive landscape’, a space or universe that is not controlled by hierarchical structure but that can give rise to a ‘meandering narration’. As a response to this environment, the spectator-listener feels an urge to synthesise the elements.

When we apply this idea to De Overstroming, we find an explanation as to why the listener feels compelled to synthesise Handke’s short story with Kuijken’s musical composition. Likewise, in De Helling van de Oude Wijven by Walpurgis there are tendencies towards narrativisation through the programme booklet that should help the spectator to interpret the wordless vocal communications of two women and the spatialisation of pre-recorded sounds and voices in the background as an imaginary, auditive landscape, which is not unlike the one described in the novel Pedro Páramo (1955) by Juan Rulfo. The collage of songs in different languages in this performance, moreover, adds to the ‘meandering narration’ that breaks with any telos towards fixed meanings and a logocentric development. Correspondingly, the texts of the novel in the brochure or in the songs lose their privileged position as constitutive for the performance and should not drive to one focal point or meaning. Rather, the linearity of text and performance is short-circuited and fragmentated by musicalisation, thereby commenting upon its fabrication by the listener.

As introduced earlier, the idea of ‘synthesis’ finds its most influential model in the Gesamtkunstwerk as realised by Wagner in the nineteenth century. Music theatre seems so often to distinguish itself from that tradition, while at the same time incorporating the same questions and solutions of synthesis in its construct. As I discuss in chapter four, the concert staging of Béla Bartók’s 1911 one-act opera Blauwbaards Burcht (2006) by Muziektheater Transparant and DeFilharmonie demonstrates a self-critical stance towards this synthesis. I will show how in this performance the concert

mode of staging with visual technology creates awareness for its hybrid construct.

As a result of this consciousness, the listener’s private, auditory imaginations are exposed for their homogenising effects on the fragmented space in the ‘headspace’, thus constituting a ‘theatre in the mind’. The performance could be seen in a fairly recent tradition of small-scale music theatre ensembles staging opera with video projections as some kind of animate wallpaper, though in this staging of Bartók’s opera the projections play an integral part in stimulating an imaginative response in the spectator. Most importantly, the influence of film and video aesthetics on music theatre demonstrates how the definitions of opera and music theatre as different developments have become rather complicated, if not unnecessary.

As the hybrid nature of my objects of study displays, the traditional definitions and characteristics of music theatre are under constant revision. By opening up the musical score to the sonorous qualities of any possible sound and highlighting its performative impact, some of the music theatre performances I discuss might as well be conceptualised as ‘audio theatre’, a theatre purely of sound. As one example that fits the latter category I discuss in chapter four Eric Sleichim’s *Men in Tribulation* (2004-2006) by Muziektheater Transparant and the ‘Bl’ndman’ quartet. In this concert installation, the use of sound technology and electroacoustic feedback reproduces a sonorous envelope that can be interpreted by the listener as an imaginary body of sound, a ‘body without organs’ moving through an imaginary space.

*Men in Tribulation* embodies some of Artaud’s visions on the use of sound in his Theatre of Cruelty as a theatre of cruel dreams. As the epigraph to my study expresses, Artaud envisions his spectator as vulnerable in the hands of a surgeon or a dentist. The clinical analogy is rather tempting here in the context of a music theatre that exemplifies how auditory distress operates in our experiences of sound and music. The theatre I discuss has a critical role to play in the acute analysis of our listening experiences, imbued with our listening culture(s), which could differ interpersonally but is rooted in a cultural discourse. Even so, auditory distress could be said to play a medicinal role in attempting to ‘remedy’ our ears – Schafer speaks of an active ‘ear-cleaning’ – since they have grown deaf in our contemporary, urbanite, auditory

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15 Such modern opera stagings with video projections share some similarities with Television Opera, such as experimented with by Bob Ashley in the 1980s, where television aesthetics were implemented in live-music performances. A recent trend in both opera and theatre continues on this line, like the *film operas* in the collaborations of Louis Andriessen with Peter Greenaway and recently with Hal Hartley, the *cinema-operas* of Weyn Traub and the stagings of music theatre with video work by Guy Cassiers, such as The Woman who walked into Doors (2001) with music of Kris Defoort, and *Onegin* (2005) with Dominique Pauwels, both coproduced by LOD. Cinema has often been said to have taken upon itself the dramatic role of opera in our lives (see Grover-Friendlander 2005), which this trend would reclaim.
environments. *Men in Tribulation* therefore makes use of amplified loops of sound that terrorise the ears. One perhaps coincidental but significant metaphor surrounding this performance fits the present investigation: the name of the ‘Bl!ndman’ quartet refers to a journal, entitled “The Blind Man”, that Duchamp published in New York in 1917, and that was based on a Dadaist idea of a blind guide who guides tourists through exhibitions. Like this story, I chose the blind brother of the De Overstroming as my audio guide throughout this study, who informs me about his audile perceptions and critical questions about what there is or could be seen in the imagination as part of every subjective experience of music theatre in relation to our culture(s) of listening.  

As a final note before I embark on the first chapter, it is necessary to clarify the central metaphor that became the title of the present study, ‘The Frequency of Imagination’. I initially started my research with the question: Could we speak of a wavelength that would tune the listener’s imagination, such as in a ‘blind’ experience of sound? The title is meant to capture this enigmatic question surrounding the acts of imagination in the course of listening. Of course, the answer to my question cannot surpass the level of metaphor. However, rather than regarding the ‘frequency’ as a metaphor for passive receptivity, I propose to read the associated metaphor of tuning the frequency of imagination in an unpretentious sense of sensitising and activating the listener in most persuasive ways.  

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16 An *audile* is a person who favours the auditory sense and ‘auditory images’ above visual or tactile stimuli, as Jonathan Sterne explains the notion: “An audile is a person in whom auditory knowing is privileged over knowing through sight. As an adverb or adjective, it means ‘of, pertaining to, or received through the auditory nerves’ or ‘of or pertaining to’ the noun sense of audile. Therefore, the term is useful because it refers to a physiological, process-based sense of hearing (as opposed to older terms like auricular) and because it references conditions under which hearing is the privileged sense for knowing or experiencing” (Sterne 2003: 61-2). Sterne draws attention to the cognitive and physiological aspects of knowing through sound. An audile would have a different sensitivity or awareness to the auditory resonances in the theatre than a visually oriented person. Though we can never accurately reproduce this sensitivity for sound in academic scholarship, the auditory experiences of the audile and the congenitally, totally blind are the ‘auditory frequency meters’, as it were, of this study.  

17 With these preliminary considerations, I do not wish to suggest, nor extend any mystical connotations of the idea of tuning, as suggested by the Greek philosophical theory of the ‘celestial monochord’, introduced by Pythagoras (580-500 BC). In this theory, the planets were believed to create distinct vibrations at their rotation around the Earth, depending on their size, velocity, distance. Pythagoras saw evidence of this idea in the mathematical calculations on a single, stretched, vibrating string, producing regular relations between distance and vibration. The theory was developed further in *Harmonice Mundi* by Johannes Kepler in 1619, claiming a relation between musical harmony and the distances of the planets to the sun. R. Murray Schafer takes up this idea in his book *The Tuning of the World*, which he finds in a drawing of a book entitled *Ultruisque Cosmi Historia* by the English mystic Robert Fludd in 1618, showing a divine hand tuning the orbits of the planets in the universe as a one-string instrument (a
Michael Forrester (2000) provides us with a conception of ‘tuning’ in a concrete sense by referring to the workings of the ear as a structure that is sensitive to the slightest differences in frequency:

Different parts of this structure are tuned to different frequencies, so that when a frequency is presented to the ear, the corresponding part of the structure vibrates—just as when a tuning fork is struck near a piano, the piano string that is tuned to the frequency of the fork will begin to vibrate. This idea proved to be essentially correct; the structure turned out to be the basilar membrane, which unlike a set of strings, is continuous (Atkinson et al. 1990: 143; qtd. in Forrester 2000: 35).

This understanding of how the basilar membrane in the cochlea of the inner ear is tuned to different frequencies substantiates the idea of how sound and music can sensitise us, calling for a reaction, a response.

Taking auditory distress as a departure point of my investigation, I intend to reveal how auditory experiences in music theatre can activate our imagination, by urging us to respond to the ‘unsettling’ frequencies. I will indicate then how auditory distress urges us to position ourselves. This positioning involves an active mode of relating to the music theatre. I will demonstrate that this way of tuning us as listeners can infect our ears with resistance as much as with desire towards what is (to be) experienced as meaningful in the theatre. Hence, I contend that auditory distress lies at the thumping heart of how music theatre makes sense to us today.

As recent history suggests, the question of auditory distress seems so inherent to a notion of music theatre that is defined by ‘distress’ in its own development and continuity, a crisis that calls for repeated reinvention and redefinition according to the discourses of its times. As such, music theatre participates and engages significantly in present-day aurality. By implication, my case studies aim at discussing these relations through the concepts, consequences and responses they invoke, which are rooted in both personal and discursive histories. It can thus be assumed that the crisis of music theatre reflects the very crisis of the contemporary listener as a listening subject, as I will introduce now in chapter one.

monochord). Though Schafer’s ideas play a significant role in the beginning of this study, my contribution to the metaphor of tuning does not aim at reviving or perpetuating any mysticisms.