

Sounding Fragilities

An Anthology

edited by Irene Lehmann and Pia Palme

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ON THE
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OF SOUNDS

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An anthology as polyphony

An introduction

Pia Palme

Sounding Fragilities invites the reader to submerge themselves in a polyphony of articulations and findings as it reviews interactions surrounding present-day composition and music theatre.¹ With the intention of cultivating literacy, the anthology brings together authors from a wide range of disciplines and different cultural backgrounds. As artists or researchers in art or science, some work independently, others are employed in various institutional contexts. Occasionally, they oscillate between disciplines and are familiar with mixed working situations. The artists among them mainly practice disciplines that are in some way connected to contemporary music theatre or opera.² These disciplines include composition and/or performance of new, experimental, improvised, or electronic music, sound art, performative arts, dance and choreography, dramaturgy, performance art, and, last but not least, literature and writing. Some artists work in multidisciplinary ways, and the same unprejudiced approach can be found with the scientific researchers in this book: their contributions cross boundaries between disciplines. Some researchers are also artists, and vice versa.

The writing formats mirror the authors' diversity, ranging from essays, research studies, experimental reflections, poetic or artistic presentations and personal scribbles, to conversations and interviews. The themes and questions that arise from the composition, performance, staging, and reception of music theatre today are manifold; the contributions look further into the way the core terrains interact with the current political and cultural contexts, taking into consideration aspects of feminism and diversity, economic and ecological discussions, digitalisation and the pandemic crisis. What draws these various positions and practices together into an anthology is the common theme of articulation through soundings and voicings in word-based formats.

The book project is anchored to a large-scale programme in artistic research conducted at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz (KUG), *On the fragility of sounds* (2019–2022), a PEEK programme of the FWF Austrian Science Fund, operated through the university's Centre of Gender Research. Under the direction of the composer, performer, and artistic researcher Pia Palme and assisted by co-researcher and musicologist Christina Fischer-Lessiak, the programme investigated contemporary music theatre and the compositional process. Several

1 The pronouns they/them are used when referring to people.

2 In the following, the terms *opera* and *music theatre* are used as synonyms.

productions and premieres of musical (theatre) pieces within the framework of this unique programme provided case studies and opportunities for investigation and experimentation.³

In 2021, the theatre and performance researcher Irene Lehmann joined the team with the aim of shifting a focus of research towards the processes of writing, articulating, and contextualising knowledge—and to publish this book. Already in 2019, Lehmann had started an association with *On the fragility of sounds* as researcher and advisor, mainly on questions related to theatre practices and theatre studies. Aiming at a wider audience, the two editors guided their book project *Sounding Fragilities* in several directions. First and foremost, the artistic process is given ample recognition and space; in particular, the composers' practices, foregrounding their ideas and activities. Secondly, the editors found it important to nourish a vibrant mycelium of knowledge by encouraging interactions between practices and disciplines. Furthermore, a significant number of female* contributors was invited to participate, as well as diverse artists from different cultures. Palme and Lehmann believe these works and visions are urgently needed to advance development as without them, the fields of art and research around music theatre would suffer from 'a lack of intellect, a lack of vision, and a lack of imagination,' instead of 'being informed by the world.'⁴ Finally, the relatively young discipline of artistic research takes a fundamental position in the overall conception of the anthology project.

Let us return to the idea of the book as polyphony: as a composition technique, polyphony is much valued in musical cultures across the world. Polyphony combines parts of equal compositional importance, which move independently and often follow their own timing—one might say, they operate in a 'democratic' and non-hierarchical way. Sounding together, the parts become a 'whole'. The auditory experience of the 'whole' is *solely* available through *listening*. It is a narrative that happens in dimensions beyond the visual and cannot be seen in the score.

To be more precise, every listener (re-)composes unique versions of 'whole', in their individual processes of perception.⁵ It is our intention as editors of this anthology that the reader's journey through the book becomes a journey of listen-

3 The website www.fragilityofsounds.org gives a comprehensive documentation and overview of the activities, presentations, publications, music contributions, collaborations and partners.

4 These words were used by the artists Mendi and Keith Obadike in November 2021, when they declined an honorary mention for the Giga-Hertz Award for Electronic Music of the ZKM Zentrum für Kunst und Medien Karlsruhe because of what they saw as grave issues regarding diversity among the jury. Read about the incident and find their statements under https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10226562134897260&id=1162860843 (accessed 1 December 2021).

5 This is the perspective of neuroscience and recent research in cognitive science (Kandel 2012; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 2016).

ing, and that individual readings will contribute to a multi-voiced literacy around music theatre.

Sounding fragilities

Pairing *fragilities* with *sounding*, the book's title traces essential lines of a complex discourse. Living beings are open and permeable as they constantly interact with their surroundings: the term *fragility* resonates with interdependence and interactivity. We are intrinsically vulnerable and fragile, yet this is also how we can communicate, live, reproduce, or decompose: nothing on earth exists in isolation. (Odum 1971; Keller & Golley, 2000; Capra & Luisi 2014). On such a fundamental level, *fragilities* refer to our co-dependent biological and ecological situation. This situation influences composition and theatre production: we inter-relate as human beings in art making. *Fragility* characterises communities and cultures—and that includes various conceptions of identity or gender. In the plural *fragilities*, aspects of feminism, inclusion, diversity, and political practices converge, reaching into the artistic process and music theatre.

Sounding addresses the totality of acoustic phenomena—the sonosphere.⁶ *Sounding* relates to the production and propagation of sound waves and to those who actively produce sound or perform music. It refers to the many instruments and technologies which humans can use in their musical practices. *Sounding* evokes hearing, perception and touch. It refers to the body resonating and sounding, to our voices and to language sounding out towards others. It relates to the editors' intention to facilitate the articulation of ideas and discourse around music theatre. *Sounding* also refers to the inner dimensions: to the 'inner' voices that sound within the spaces of our minds, and further to human activities such as writing, reading, thinking, and reflecting. The auditory quality of these processes has been described by linguists and phenomenologists alike (Ihde 2007). In this way, *sounding* is about literacy, music, theatre, and culture—and that includes our personal, intimate inner spaces as individuals.

According to the cognitive scientist and experimental psychologist Albert S. Bregman, 'the auditory world is like the visual world be if all objects were very, very transparent and glowed in sputters and starts by their own light, as well as reflecting the light of their neighbours' (Bregman 1990, p. 37). All auditory phenomena interact with their respective environments in multiple ways; reflections, echoes, masking, and interferences all influence human perception. Soundings are as fragile as living entities: they constantly communicate with each other and with their surroundings.

6 This term was introduced by Pauline Oliveros (2011).

Fragmented fragilities

An introduction

Irene Lehmann

In my associative mind, fragilities are connected closely with fragments. This draws on a concept which has been present in thinking about the relation of philosophy and art since the 18th century where it is prominently linked with authors like Friedrich Schlegel, who explores certain artworks as ‘fragments of the future.’¹ Walter Benjamin ties in with this strain of philosophy and critical hermeneutics in his writings on art criticism or the art of translation (Benjamin 1972, 2008) and further develops it in connection with Jewish thought.² In his study of sound and ‘listening images’ in Benjamin’s writings, Martin Mettin also investigates these relationships. He points out that in Kabbalah, truth is described as a light that was filled into vessels, of which some were unfortunately not strong enough and burst into fragments. However, some of the light clings like oil to the fragments which are scattered all over the world. Mettin (2019, p. 33) compares this image with ideas on the broken and shattered parts of history in Benjamin’s philosophy of history and the construction of the dialectical ‘thought image’ (Benjamin 1961). Benjamin entertains the idea that there are fortuitous moments in history, when humans are able to discover ways to recombine some of these fragments, thereby discovering forgotten layers and experiencing sudden insights in unexpected connections. Although some fragments might be lost or have sharp contours, the effort of combining them bears the promise of allowing a light to shine through the intermediary rifts and spaces in between the fragments. This figure of thought may also offer a possibility to understand and shape the relations between artistic research and established disciplines of academic and scientific research, of practice-based and theoretical knowledges.

Since the Bologna accord from 1999, the system of academic research in Europe entails artistic research as a discipline, but there is still intense discussion into how to situate this area within the system of established academic fields. Today, research areas are divided into the natural and life sciences, social sciences, and humanities. A further distinction is made between fundamental research and applied sciences; within these systematic subdivisions a position for artistic research

1 Schlegel introduces with this concept a positive notion of the fragment that was influential on modernist aesthetics and contradicted ‘classical’ representational aesthetics in his time. See Strack/Eicheldinger 2011.

2 See on Benjamin’s position in the tradition of hermeneutics Regehly (1992). His relation to Jewish thought was strongly informed by discussions with Gershom Sholem.

is sought (Borgdorff 2007, Früchtel 2019, Henke et al. 2020). However, in more recently developed fields like gender or diversity studies, interdisciplinary transgressions between the different research fields are prominently at play. This quality of interrelatedness applies also for the arts. Beyond academic departments, art and philosophy have created systems of hierarchization for the different genres of the arts like music, theatre, architecture, etc. The contingency of these hierarchizations is revealed when comparing the disputes about which art should be located at the highest position. While G.W.F. Hegel sets drama at the top of his hierarchy, due to its structural qualities, Arthur Schopenhauer claims the highest position for music, since he considers music to have the greatest distance to language and takes this as a decisive quality (Ulrich 2001).

Although today we can look back on several waves of intrenchments or interweaving of the arts that have occurred throughout the 20th century, and an increasing amount of interdisciplinary studies at universities over the past thirty years, the effects and competitions from hierarchized systematizations are still palpable in today's encounters between different areas of study and research; sometimes more openly, sometimes as an undercurrent within discussions and co-operations. Since institutional competitions endanger the understanding of the subcutaneous effects of these historically established hierarchies, their reflection and consideration is necessary for envisioning and practicing interdisciplinary research. The hierarchizations and their effects are connected to what philosopher Jacques Rancière (1998) grasps with the 'division of the sensible,' when he traces the policing of listening and voicing protest or the social division of urban spaces throughout European history. The division and hierarchization of the arts and related departments of study have on the one hand enabled specializations, but on the other they have also shaped and controlled epistemic approaches and accessibilities.

These divisions can leave those researchers from different fields who are involved in interdisciplinary exchange sometimes just as puzzled as those humans carrying ancient fragments of truth in their hands. Yet there are also moments when difficulties and frictions can be set aside and fortuitous moments of recognition and cognizance occur: when the light shines through the rifts of a former whole or when a new whole begins to take shape. This sometimes occurs when an encounter uncovers common interests and the actual possibility of communication across the borders of disciplines and discourses.

Encounters

As a part of my research on *Resonating knowledges*, where I pursue interferential phenomena and fields where humanities and artistic research touch, I have conducted research in association with Pia Palme and Christina Fischer-Lessiak's project *On the fragility of sounds* (KUG Graz 2018–2021) and also with Heike Langsdorf's research project *Distraction as a discipline* (KASK Gent 2017–2019, see

Arteaga/Langsdorf 2018–2021; Lehmann 2021).³ In addition to tracing discourses on the connections between art, philosophy, and artistic research, within both projects I acted for limited periods not only as an associated but as an involved researcher. This research practice can be compared to ethnographic field research where the method of participatory observation is applied, yet in pursuit of a different objective. By leaving the position of a distanced researcher, I didn't 'join' the social group ('the artists') in order to study their social and cultural practices, as an ethnographer would have aimed at. I was rather interested in studying specific practices and processes of knowledge and art production. The projects I have been involved with were rooted in different art genres and research interests—composition, music theatre and listening in the one case, dance, choreography, and creating interactive research settings in the other case—and have thus allowed me to gain insight into various practices of artistic research.

In the *On the fragility of sounds* project, as well as in this book, the researchers focused their work on different practices of composing and performing. Through this, a particular genre of music theatre emerges, where performers, acoustic and electronic instruments, auditory and visual spatial arrangements shape the performance as a site of interaction. Regarding the capacity of music theatre to find new connections between music and theatre and leave hierarchies behind makes it a promising field for research into the connections between arts and knowledges.

Traditional hierarchical views tend to denounce music in the theatre often as 'stage music' or cast out theatrical elements of music that contradict an idea of the *musique pure*. A recent variation of these divisions is described by Jonathan Sterne (2003), a pioneer of sound studies, as 'audio-visual litanies.' They are often found, not only in western cultures, in strains of thought that are critical towards visual dominance. This tendency to ontologize and hierarchize human capacities of perception and senses not only contradicts psychological findings on synaesthetic phenomena. What is more, to attribute an emancipatory potential reductively to listening bears a tendency towards the re-hierarchization of the senses. 'Audio-visual litanies' contradict the principally open situation of music theatre, which yields new genres and thus new possibilities for sensual perception.

Throughout the history of music theatre and opera, the emergence of new genres has also had a strong effect on how gender and sexual identities are presented and negotiated on stage. The partly related codification of aesthetic practices, sounds, instruments, colours, and offstage practices such as light and stage design, direction and prompting has led to strong inequalities and toxic power relations in

3 This research project evolved from my studies on gender relations in artistic contexts that include practices of composing-performing. This latter (preliminary) project was funded by the Philosophic faculty and the Bureau for gender and diversity at Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuernberg, Germany. As a part of this research, a symposium was organized in 2018 and results published together with Katharina Rost and Rainer Simon (Lehmann, Rost, Simon 2019).