## Digital opera: **towards a new model of perception**

**90**     Notably, in *The Forest Murmurs* we did not have a teacher to tell us what to do. Nobody guided us – there was no dialectic to raise our consciousness and no Grand Narrative acting as an over-arching framework – however, as in the form of the digital media, we chose which connections to make and thus the mental journey we took. Although the audience viewed the fictional world of the stage through a traditional theatre proscenium arch, the choices of perspective offered through the arch were multiple through the manipulation of stage space and multi medial representation, which created a hypermediacy in performance. Devised with dramaturg Meredith Oakes, conceptualized and staged by opera director Tim Hopkins and conducted brilliantly by Stephen Sloane, *The Forest Murmurs* explored the music, poetry, literature and philosophy of the German Romantic imagination.     **[ ··· ]**

Hopkins divided the overture of *Fidelio* into four staged actions. The first section located his characters: 'devoted mother', 'loyal wife', 'excited maiden', 'primitive hero', 'hunter', and 'cerebral poet' within the fictional space of forest. Trapped in-between the fictional space by the front gauze, the stage characters began to see shadows play on the back-projection screen, giving intimations of an unseen 'something unseen' located within nature. In the second section of the overture, as the characters began to move around and inhabit the forest, so too did their shadow images – live and mediatized action was set within the frame of forest, which was itself set on a theatre stage.

In the third section of the overture, the downstage gauze flew out and the characters had the opportunity to leave the fictional (cinematic/theatrical) space of the forest and enter the live (but fictional) world of theatre. They moved off the rostrum stage into the space between the picture frame forest and the orchestra pit. Situated literally in-between the orchestra pit and the forest: in-between realities and in-between media, they appeared uneasy in the harsh white lighting associated with epic theatre. Here, laurel leaf crowns were thrown at them from the wings, tempting them to pick them up, which they did. As they crowned themselves, their future selves – the 'Gods of the Forest' looked on approvingly.

In the final section of the overture, the 'Gods of the Forest' returned in digital media format – the bright blue of the computer screen – and the role models of the nineteenth century came together, in play, with their doubles – who were dressed in the clothes of Germany in 1940. The irony is that this happened as the theme of freedom that foretells the end of the opera *Fidelio* played. Composed in 1805 as Napoleon's French troops occupied Vienna and Europe's monarchies reeled under the impact of the ideas and political ramifications of the French revolution, Beethoven's opera stands at the cusp of Classicism and Romanticism and established the first German Romantic operatic 'hero' who operated at individual, national and mythical levels. *The Forest Murmurs*, questions the impact of the Romantic hero, in love and in political and mythical mode on the German nation. During the overture, the movement from early pantheistic individual desires, through to its later fatal manifestation in German Nationalism is reflected by a similar move in medial transformation from early film stock to digital manipulation.

The acting area was divided into three separate spaces. (1) The space in-between the orchestra and the first picture frame was *in-between the realities* created by music and theatre: in-between the ontology of the two media that is opera. (2) The fictional space of the rostrum stage was an *intermedial stage area* that drew freely on theatre, cinema and music. Here the dramatic and narrative representation took place. (3) The back and front projection screens, which dominated the stage, created a *cinematic space*. Looking through the proscenium arch of the theatre was cinema. The scale of the screens and the use of the moving and static images dominated the operatic space. The screens defined the different areas of the stage and told the narrative of the relationship between the live singers and their mediatized selves on the screen. The orchestral music was one medium among film and theatre performance, with singers caught literally inter-media between the film projectors, the stage space and the orchestra space.

**94**    In part one, the staged numbers moved very swiftly, hardly giving the audience a moment to breathe and no opportunity to sink into a fixed perspective. This was partly because the presence of so many *Lied*:

> [  ] the Lied, or art song is surely the most paradoxical [...] at once the most private and yet universalizing of art forms the Lied, less than a century ago, stood at the forefront of late Romanticism. Together with orchestral and various types of instrumental music, and later the music dramas of Richard Wagner, it formed a part of a Teutonic musical juggernaut widely regarded as without peer (Parsons 2004: 3).

The intimate personal art song was expanded to give private expression of universal anxiety and was demonstrated by the direction of the men's chorus for *Flucht* and the women's chorus for *Mailied* (Schubert). The men first, and then the women entered stage right, presented themselves centre stage, assumed an expressionistic pose, sang and exited stage left. Thus, Hopkins enacted the 'wipe' action of silent cinema and indicated the psychological relationship of early film. The act of showing (ostention) on film and showing via the movement of the actors' bodies the emotional content of the music became a structure of the opera. At times, the immediacy of the music enticed us into the piece (as in the *Fidelio* quartet), at other times, the beauty of the image created an immediacy via lyric patterns. Immediacy and hypermediacy acted simultaneously, creating many windows to watch and listen to, and remediated our operatic experience. This culminated in the lyrical film accompanying 'The Chorus Mysticus' from Schumann's *Scenes from Faust*.

## Framing the staging of the orchestra

In part one, the image dominated the stage space and remediated our experience of the music. In part two, the orchestra played within the frame of the stage, which remediating the theatrical stage space.



**Figure 25**
Framing the staging
of the orchestra.
*The Forest Murmurs: adventures in the*
*German Romantic Imagination*

[ ... ]

Note that for this song the orchestra and conductor were hidden behind the front gauze, which was now operative in its 'moiré' effect and foregrounding the act of perception. It allowed Hopkins to stage writing on the screen and place the role models of nineteenth century German society in epic lighting and the stage space of the intermedial. Thus, the values of the German Romantic imagination on German society were questioned as Romanticism in opera was remediated.

## Remediating reading: intermediality, perception and education

Perception about the possession of knowledge was glimpsed in many of the individual 'fragments' (episodes) that formed the structure of the piece. This is a similarity with *Mahagonny*, but also a difference, for in *The Forest* the fragments operated more by way of free association made by the receivers. There was no obvious linking plot line or grand narrative present to drive home a message, which gives this piece more of a digital than social dialectical structure. The performers did make *links* between the fragments. For example, at the end of *Hans Heiling* the soloists held the gesture as they looked down into the pit where they had thrown the books away. In their ostended gesture, it was possible to see the bonfires of literature to come. A cinematic style edit linked their ostended gesture to the sound of the choir of the Leibstandarte-SS (Hitler's Bodyguard) singing the Volkish Fascist song, *Edelweiss*, which provoked images in the mind of endless and relentless soldier's feet marching in time to the driving military beat. Their target was the 1940's 'giants' who were 'lined-up' before us on the screen and literally written-on by superimposing the text of the song over their bodies. Watched from the stage by their 19th century counterparts, their images were minimized to the size of puppet dolls. Once reduced in scale, their 'live' stage doubles retrieved 'their' images from the film screen and tore the puppet dolls (themselves) apart, as we glimpsed the Nazi emblem passing behind on the screen: it was a chilling intermedial moment.

The music and multimedia elements were structured so that they became *hyperlinks*, which the audience had to activate in their minds by *making connections* to the unseen text behind the intermedial text. Hyperlinks are a feature of digital technology and an inter-active way of reading hyperfiction:

> A hyperlink creates a connection between two elements, for example, between two words in two different pages, or a sentence on one page and an image in another, or two different places within the same page. Elements connected through hyperlinks can exist on the same computer or on different computers connected on a network, as in the case of the World Wide Web (Manovich 2001: 41)

[ ... ]

[ ... ]

## Conclusions

What we have seen is a change in the model. The Brechtian model placed the audience in the position of the receiver of the message, which instructed them to apply the message of the performance to the real world. Digital opera is multi-layered, non-linear and circular, which invites the audience to be intrigued, excited and alert to different perceptions offered in a variety of medial modes but does not instruct – it offers different possibilities. In contemporary life, we travel through intermedial and intertextual forests, and may be excited by the variety of possibilities, but we do not have a guide now that the grand narratives have been, at least to a certain extent, displaced.

Digital opera is not the inclusion of highly sophisticated media technologies in opera – *The Forest Murmurs* was definitely not a 'high-tech' production. Rather, digital opera functions as *hyperfiction*, as all computer interfaces do. Hyperfiction or in our case, *hypermediacy* is a 'windowed' presentation of individual units / fragments / modules / call them what you will, and the person who creates the meaning of the hyperfiction/hypermediacy is located in the reader – not in the sender of the message.

Crucially, digital opera displaces the traditional centre (authorial control of music and text) and all elements have an equal weighting. I recognise that *The Forest* was not strictly a digital model because it did not include an interface where the audience controls the order of the narrative and may change it – so that they experience the world presented in a non-linear mode. However, given that caveat, essentially, digital opera as I have used it, is a non-hierarchical multi-layered mode of performance, where all the elements of media, text and performance styles come together into an intermedial texture awaiting the organising mind and body of the audience. Intermediality, perception and education are inextricably linked to each other and they cultivate humanity through liberal education.

The structure of *The Forest Murmurs* brought to the surface the underlying force of the unseen – and it is a feature of the digital and the intermedial that we can never see the structure, or our individual place in it. When we perceive how lost we might become in the hypermedial forest of the digital age, and the potential for anarchy as communities break down into individual fragments, we too might like

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to stand back from the digital and reflect. Perhaps it is time to remediate our own thoughts about the digital and recognise that what we are playing with as 'artistic toys' in theatre practice, places us all in the *rhizome* – where we cannot see the beginning or the end.[8] Following Deleuze, I suggest that as a global society, we may not yet see the true awfulness of the digital age – although, through analogy the final scene of *The Forest Murmurs* gives an indication of some potential outcomes.

Through analogy again, we need now to make our final step, which is that given digital technology underpins global society, is it not time now to make explicit what is implicit through contemporary opera performance practice and in the philosophy of education? Following Nussbaum, Foucault, Deleuze and Opera North we need to recognize that there is a need for an integrated intermedial approach to theatre and educational research. I suggest that there is a need to remediate research connections between the arts and sciences, media and theatre, philosophy, history and the social world. Failure to make these intermedial research connections raises the possibility that we may remain forever in the rhizome.

**Notes**
1 Cited in Seldon, Widdowson and Brooker (eds.) 1997: 99.
2 See Chiel Kattenbelt's chapter in this book.
3 See Chiel Kattenbelt's chapter in this book.
4 All the extracts of conversations in this chapter are with Tom Marandola (professional singer and vocal coach) and Rosemary Ashe (opera and music theatre principal).
5 See Peter Boenisch's chapter where he talks about Kittler's definition of mediality. I see it as a very similar process to that undertaken by singers in rehearsal and performance.
6 Klemens Gruber talks about this also in his chapter.
7 This and the following two quotations are from *The Forest Murmurs* programme.
8 See *Key Issues* chapter for explanation of Deleuze's concept of the rhizome.