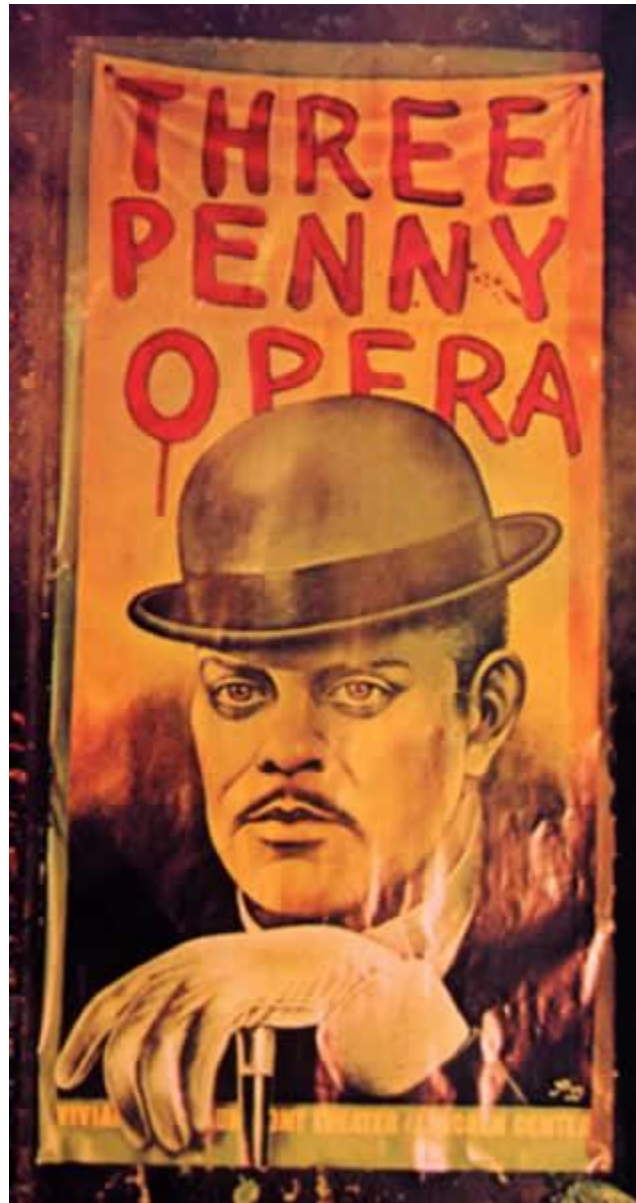


The Use of Music in the Light of Brechtian Theories and Practices

Dr. Hemant Kumar Shukla and Dr. D.R. Purohit



Courtesy: <http://www.threepennyopera.org/mediaPosters.php>

Abstract

The present investigation focuses on the musical techniques which could prove to be effective to alienate the audience from being carried out. Bertolt Brecht's disgust with the dramatic theatre which was Aristotelian Theatre in his view motivated him to find out the ways in which the audience could be stopped to identify themselves with the characters, plot and situation. His targeted audience was common and ordinary people. He wanted to make them aware, knowledgeable of the causes of their miseries. Epic Theatre was the result of his long search and research for a theatre which could be capable of catering to the aspirations and desires of the common and ordinary people which were his targeted audience. Music was the area in which he tried to experiment. Whatever he wanted, you will read in the forthcoming lines what kind of the music he aspired. He wanted HIS MUSIC to be setting forth the text, taking the text for granted, taking up a position, giving the attitude. In what way? What were the experiments? Please read the paper.

Key Words: gestus, gestic music, Die Hauspostille, Verfremdungseffekt, The Threepenny Opera

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956)

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), a German Dramatist, was of the view that the isolated episodes of the play should retain their individual significance, even if taken out of the context of the play as a whole. In the same way, the non-literary elements of the production like decor, music and choreography should also retain their independence. Music was utilized by Brecht to create alienation effect. Brecht suggests that “words, music and setting must become more independent of one another.”¹ In Epic Theatre, the actors through their singing capability report the human nature, situations, and impulses. They work like a reporter. To keep the audience relaxed and yet receptive, they stimulate their critical faculties and to make them think the Epic Theatre employs the music that is capable of communicating the meaning. Brecht lays down certain rules for the music of epic theatre which are in direct contradiction with the music of dramatic theatre.²

Dramatic Theatre

- Music which heightens the text
- Music which proclaims the text
- Music which illustrates
- Music which paints the psychological situation

Epic Theatre

- Music which sets forth the text
- Music which takes the text for granted
- Which takes up a position
- Which gives the attitude

Variety of Music in Brecht's Plays

Brecht's plays make extensive use of music in a tremendous variety of styles. He secured the services of distinguished composers, such as **Weill, Hindemith, Eisler and Dessau**. Music, at first, was used to break the illusion of reality merely by bringing variety. Later Brecht evolved the theory that whereas conventionally (as in Wagner) music was a narcotic, reinforcing emotion, in the Epic theatre it should provoke thought, dispel illusion and drive out emotion. This led to the idea of '**gestic music**' - music which would inform the audience about "the right intellectual response to events depicted in the drama."³

Theatrical Music

The production of *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928 was the first use of theatrical music in accordance with Brecht's new view point regarding the music for Epic Theatre. It is significant to note what Ronald Grey quotes from Brecht on the issue: "The estrangement effect occurs when the thing to be understood, the thing to which attention is to be drawn, is changed from an ordinary, well known, immediately present thing into a particular, striking, unexpected thing. In a certain sense the self-evident is made incomprehensible, although this only happens in order to make it all the more comprehensible."⁴ And this is the matter of everyday occurrences. In the same way Brecht tried to present *The Threepenny Opera*. First, he strictly separated the music from all other elements of entertainment. Even superficially this was evident from the fact that the orchestra was installed on the stage in the full vision of the audience. The orchestra was fully lit up and the titles of the various numbers were projected on the screens at the back during the song sequences and the actors changed their position before the number began. All these things were new, strange to the audience and it must have definitely created visual jerk giving way to

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alienation. Useless to say, the music played a very crucial role in the success of the play. Brecht explains, “The musical items, which had the immediacy of ballad were of a reflective and moralizing nature. The play showed the close relationship between the emotional life of the bourgeois and that of the criminal world. The criminals showed, sometimes through the music itself, that their sensations, feelings and prejudices were the same as those of the average citizen and theatergoer....A trio expressed concern at the fact that the uncertainties of life on the planet apparently prevent the human race from following its natural inclinations towards goodness and decent behavior....In such ways the music took up a purely emotional attitude and spurned, rejected or rather say refused note of the stock narcotic attractions.”⁵

Actors as Singers

In *The Threepenny Opera*, the singers were primarily actors and the songs interruptions; the music was never allowed to swamp the continually lucid text. The melodies were nostalgic, the counterpoint near and the harmonies often disconcertingly prickly, but it was scored for a band of eight musicians only, and the singers come from the world of the theatre and the cabaret, not from the grand operatic stage. Such methods imposed new rules, which were outlined by Brecht in the notes to *The Threepenny Opera*:

Nothing is more revolting than the actor who pretends not to notice that he has left the level of plain speech and started to sing. The three levels-plain speech, heightened speech and singing-must always remain distinct....As for the melody, he must not follow it blindly: there is a kind of speaking against-the music which can have strong effects; the results of a stubborn, incorruptible sobriety which is independent of music and rhythm’. Music here becomes a kind of punctuation, an underlining of the words, a well-aimed comment giving the gist of the action or the text. And this remains its prime function in all Brecht’s plays.⁶

Clear Separation of Songs from Dialogue

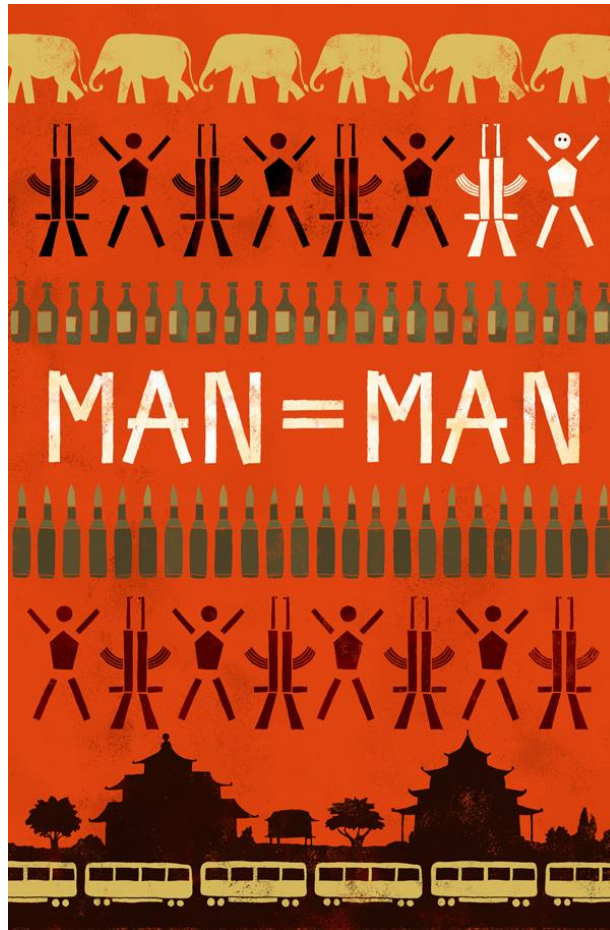
Brecht, throughout his life, followed the principles of *The Threepenny Opera*: clear division of songs from dialogue; no illustrative or ‘psychological’ element in the music; an

orchestra of not more than thirty, and the singer as ‘reporter’ whose private feelings must remain a private affair.⁷

Martin Esslin writes that music in the theatre apart from decor and choreography retains its independence; instead of serving as mere auxiliaries to the text, reinforcing it by stressing some of its features and painting in atmosphere mood or descriptive details. It is raised to the level of autonomous element; instead of pulling in the same direction as the words, it enters into a dialectical, contrapuntal relationship with them. In epic theatre, he says:

“The musical numbers are no longer smuggled in at the point when the emotional charge of a scene rises to a climax and speech merges into song-but are introduced as entirely distinct ingredients of the play, which interrupt its flow, break the illusion, and thereby render the action ‘**strange**’. And within the musical numbers themselves the music does not merely express the mood of the words: it often stands in contradiction to them, comments on them, or reveals the falsity of the sentiments they express.”⁸

Music in Epic Theatre: Used to Break the Illusion of Empathy



Courtesy: <https://scpa.ucalgary.ca/events/man-equals-man>

In the Epic Theatre, music is frequently used to break the illusion of empathy. The characters continuously address the audience directly, explaining and commenting on their action, and pointing the moral. This they do often in a few lines of verse. In addition there are the characteristic ‘songs’, summing up the moral of the story in a concise and trenchant form. H. F. Garten gives the example of Brecht’s play *Man Equals Man*: it is the first of his plays to introduce ‘song’ at the culminating points of the action, voicing general reflections and pointing the moral of the case. These songs are for the most part incorporated in his first collection of poetry, published under the title *Die Hauspostille* (‘Book of family progress’, 1927) which served as an inexhaustible source of lyrics for his plays.⁹ Garten cites another example of *The Threepenny Opera* in which the music was given by Kurt Weill. It is in the ‘song’ that the revolutionary challenge is most pungently expressed. Garten quotes the following lines of Brecht in *The Threepenny Opera* which are in conformity with Marxist doctrine that society is ruled by

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economic factors while all moral and religious concepts are mere ideologies serving the interests of the rich:

First comes gobbling, then morality.
First the poor, too, must be allowed
To cut themselves their share from the large loaf.

Actor in Epic Theatre

In epic theatre, the actor, through his songs, comments on the plot and the part which he is playing in order to instruct the spectators about the real social, political and historical causes of the events which he is seeing. But in this process, music can involve the spectators emotionally. Brecht was quite aware that the drama was bound to arouse emotion. He was, therefore, not against emotion but only against empathy. Emotion should not drown the intellect: it had to be harnessed to the didactic and political needs of art.¹⁰ Hans Reiss writes, “Brecht was aware of the perpetual tension between satisfying the emotions and using emotions to arouse criticism; he hoped that the dramatic devices of his Epic Theatre would succeed in resolving this problem”¹¹ That is why, the Epic Theatre actor’s frequent comments on the plot and part through the songs that are meant to prevent the spectators’ emotional involvement. Only then, the spectators can be made aware of the real causes of their sufferings and problems. Only then, they would be stirred to action.

Musical Composition – Gestic Music

The musical composition in the epic production was regarded to be ‘**Gestic music**’ by Brecht for “Gest is not supposed to mean gesticulation: it is not a matter of explanatory or emphatic movements of the hands, but of overall attitudes. A language is Gestic when it is grounded in a Gest and conveys particular attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other men”¹² Hans Reiss explains that the ‘gestus’ is a term by which Brecht seeks to denote one whole way of life as it has become historically conditioned. For any gestus arises from the historical situation to which one belongs. But one can choose the class in history to which one wishes to belong. Brecht himself left the *bourgeois*, because it repelled him, and joined the proletariat.¹³ Alfred D.

white interprets 'gestus' as "the basic attitude which informs any particular transaction between people."¹⁴

Brecht elaborates the artistic principle of '**Gestic Music**', "The musician sees this (gest) initially as an artistic principle, and not an especially interesting one. It may perhaps help him to set his texts in a particular lively and easily assimilated way. What is more important is the fact that this principle of looking to the gest can allow him to adopt his own political attitude while making music. For that it is essential that he should be setting a social gest."¹⁵ He further elaborates the point: "The gest of working is definitely a social gest, because all human activity directed towards the mastery of nature is a social undertaking, an undertaking between men"¹⁶ He explains, "A good way of judging a piece of music with a text is to try out the different attitudes or gest with which the performer ought to deliver the individual section: politely or angrily, modestly or contemptuously, approvingly or argumentatively, craftily or without calculation. For this the most suitable gests are as common, vulgar and banal as possible."¹⁷

Brecht was the master of gestic language but his '**songs**' also have these gestic characters. They are even more pronounced, even more clearly magnified, exhibits of basic attitudes, for the music makes the fusion of words and gesture even more compelling. Brecht pointed to the way street singers render the more vulgar kind of popular song with large and simple gestures. His own 'songs' were designed to achieve a similar effect on actor and audience alike by crystallizing an essential, fundamental attitude and exhibiting it with the utmost clarity: despair or resignation, defiance or submission."¹⁸

Fully Visible Orchestra

That the Orchestra, musical instruments are fully visible to the view of the audiences and the musicians were also placed on the stage itself was meant to interrupt the action and to give the audience an opportunity to reflect, says Esslin. The coming of such an interruption is usually announced beforehand by some visible change on the stage: the title of the song may flash on to a screen, special lights may be put on, or a symbolic emblem (e.g. flags and trumpets) may come down from the flies."¹⁹

These mechanical devices through the use of music may help the actors in creating the ‘*Verfremdungseffekt*’, but they nevertheless leave the brunt of the work of ‘making things strange to the audience’. The temptation to identify himself with the character must always remain strong for the actor. Brecht used a variety of techniques including the use of music to enable him to overcome this temptation.²⁰

Notes and References

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willet (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 38.

² *ibid.*, p. 38.

³ <http://www.teachit.co.uk/armoore/drama/brecht.htm>.

⁴ Ronald Gray, *Brecht* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1961), p. 68.

⁵ *Brecht on Theatre*, p.85.

⁶ John Willet, *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht* (London: Methuen & Co., 1977), pp. 131-32.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 133.

⁸ Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1963), pp. 113-14.

⁹ H.F. Garten, *Modern German Drama* (London: Methuen & Co., 1964), pp. 203-04.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 205-06.

¹¹ Hans Reiss, *The Writer's Task from Nietzsche to Brecht* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1978), p.153.

¹² *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 104.

¹³ Hans Reiss, p.150.

¹⁴ Alfred D. White, *Bertolt Brecht's Great Plays* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1978), p.41.

¹⁵ *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 104

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.105.

¹⁸Martin Esslin, p. 119.

¹⁹ ibid., p. 122.

²⁰ ibid., p. 122.



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