

Richard Ayres and Javier López Piñón in conversation about their cross-faculty music theatre project.

Expanding the modus operandi

Interview by Marijke Hoogenboom

From 2010 to 2011, singer and opera director Anthony Heidweiller was the AIR at the Conservatorium van Amsterdam and de Theaterschool. The primary aim of his residency was to bring members of the teaching staff from a wide range of courses into contact to foster exchanges rooted in their individual art practices.

One of the plans realised in this period was the regeneration of the Director course's opera project. Heidweiller invited opera and stage director Javier López Piñón to work together for the first time with composer Richard Ayres. From the outset, López Piñón and Ayres took as the basis for their collaboration the synergy between their individual interests and disciplines. In a similar way, the students from the Conservatorium van Amsterdam and de Theaterschool were asked to share the entire artistic process with one another and to accompany each other all the way along the road from initial concept to final performance.

The restructured music theatre project has now earned itself a permanent place in the curriculum for both Direction and Composition students. Javier López Piñón has also been able to expand his mission and is presently working with the Dutch National Opera Academy on two new collaborations between the schools – the aim is to make combined music and theatre training an indispensable component in the students' education.

What was your personal motivation for initiating this collaboration between music and theatre students? And how do you relate to the different disciplines and their ideas about education?

Javier López Piñón (JLP): I already wanted to make opera, right from when I started out on my education as a stage director in 1975. But everybody thought that opera was in its last days: even Pierre Boulez declared opera dead. So there was no specialised curriculum and I had to organise everything I was interested in myself. Now, I often encounter directing students who have the ambition to at least include opera and music theatre in their practice, if not totally specialise in it. So I'm very pleased that I can now help building a programme that I myself missed so much. The other development I see is that concerts are getting more and more theatrical, and contemporary forms of opera and music theatre have developed further. Students should be encouraged to think in terms of music as well as theatre within the framework of their education. I am fully aware that the process of arriving at music is totally different from the process of arriving at theatre. And that's the biggest challenge: when the two worlds meet – even in the organisation of our own project. We are inviting musicians to do something different from what they have been trained for. They are used to working very quickly, very efficiently, using the smallest amount of time to achieve the maximum result. Theatre is a very different thing. With theatre you start with nothing and then the process itself actually determines what kind of product will result from it. Bringing these different approaches, these modus operandi, together presents the greatest risk in this project – and gives me the greatest joy.

Richard Ayres (AR): It's true, usually a composition is finished before you put it in front of the performers and most composers are not involved in an extended collaboration where things

might change – even though opera or music theatre as a final product is a combination of many art forms. For me personally, the two perspectives of music and theatre are not so different from each other. I studied technical theatre arts and stage management before I enrolled at the conservatory. I just didn't know that composing was something one could study or do. Most of my work now is with opera, but most of my other pieces in the past twelve years have theatrical elements as well. These experiences of sitting in rehearsals have always remained very important to me. I try to combine all my past into what's happening now, so I think I'm naturally interested in the theatre. In general, I think it's very difficult to separate musical performance from theatre. Concert is theatre. You can't get away from that. It's fully embedded in theatrical rituals: the lights go out and you create theatre in your imagination. It's not literary theatre, but it is theatre.

So, what is the perspective for education in the situation you're describing?

JLP: This ritualisation of the live concert and the whole idea of a symphony orchestra with a conductor belongs to the 19th century. It's curious how nothing disappears: things only get added to the practice. One can still, even in Holland, witness a concert as if it was in the 19th century, with the same repertoire and the same habits. As an audience, we should be aware that we are taking part in a ritual or a spectacle from another time. But why do we keep reproducing it? Parts of that heritage are still valid, but it's not the only possibility. In my opinion things have to change in a major way in order to acknowledge that there is much more

happening in the field.

RA: A conservatory is basically a school for modernist chamber music. We have no permanent orchestra. Anything theatrical – the lighting, the staging – is really hard to organise. Everything is set up against that. So people end up writing for small ensembles in a traditional concert hall. That is strange and worrying and almost alienating because I have nothing to do with that in my own work. I tend to see organisations outside the school resisting small-scale and traditional composition. At the moment, disciplines and departments are so divided in the art school. It wouldn't take so much to restructure that, but I think there is little ambition to offer another kind of environment to the students or to stimulate interschool projects.

JLP: There is a big difference between the educational cultures at the Conservatorium and de Theaterschool. At the Conservatorium, the schooling is individualised, grouped around one instrument. One student and one teacher get together in a room. Instrumentalists are such highly trained individuals that it is very difficult to go beyond the existing educational system. But the attitude of singer students does seem to have changed over the last twenty years. In the beginning they resembled instrumentalists and focused only on their quality as a singer, but now students are equally ambitious about acting, moving, understanding, interpreting style and so on. They have to if they want to be competitive, because the norm for singers has become outrageously complicated and very high-standard. At de Theaterschool, collaboration is essential. Especially stage directors have to look at all the different aspects of making theatre and blend them into one thing.

RA: Another struggle is that 99 per cent of the education of student-composers is hearing their own music, but in a school situation it's really hard to get players to play their music, let alone to get a ten-piece chamber ensemble together. There isn't enough structure to solve that problem: dedicated time with a student orchestra, for example, or study points given to players to encourage them to join in with this kind of project. If we had just had three hours a year with an orchestra so that six composers could hear their work for half an hour, it would change their lives and expand their education tremendously. For instrumentalists, too, it's a valuable experience to collaborate and to work in different contexts. There are about 100 violin and woodwind players in the school and I doubt if they're all going

to be good enough for the Concertgebouw. Instrumentalists have to be flexible – just like singers, actors and directors. But in order to open up their experience, you would need to include teachers from other backgrounds, from other instrumental practices. At present, the Conservatorium mainly focuses on people who play in an orchestra teaching other people to play in an orchestra.

How did you translate these concerns into a single project and what were the challenges?

JLP: The framing of our project was actually dictated by the fact that it is a theatre project. On the one hand, we wanted to foster the musicality of stage directors because music is such an essential tool for their work. On the other hand, we wanted to initiate a new kind of collaboration between directors and composers: two groups of artists who are used to taking the lead in artistic processes. We asked stage directors and composers to find common ground and to work out a shared concept, and at the same time we restricted the parameters almost beyond acceptability: one singer, one instrument, and seven minutes maximum. The inspiration for the piece was an interview with a singer from the choir of the Netherlands Opera about his career. The whole point is for students to create a starting point together that is different from their normal practice. Now they are really having to communicate. We hope the opera project has given them a huge boost in firing their curiosity about using other tools and approaches. My understanding of the genre we are dealing with here is much larger than only music theatre or opera. I see stage directing in this context as composing in time and space.

RA: I think composition students will realise that the finished product that comes out of a process such as this isn't just about them. It's truly about a group of people working together. In a way, the music becomes functional: it serves the production. It could also help them to make music for film for instance, or for dance; they discover the functional aspect of making music. Also, the principle of getting out there and finding a theme in real people's stories was challenging. Music can be very enclosed in its own little ritual; this is a step towards getting it beyond the concert hall and getting composers talking to people and thinking of music representing something or conveying a message.

JLP: As a teacher and facilitator in this project, I am first of all trying to break down the prejudices that both

stage directors and composers have. And then I'm helping them to ask each other the right questions, because they don't yet understand each other's language. So it's my responsibility to mediate and to talk drama to the composers and music to the directors. Finally I've witnessed stage directors accepting the space that composers need to take.

RA: That's exactly what impressed me too. In the five final opera works that we performed in Amsterdam and The Hague, I actually saw composers direct and directors compose and I'm not sure anymore what the difference is between listening to a concert or watching a concert, or between listening to a theatre piece or seeing a theatre piece.

What feedback did the students give, and what is the long-term perspective of an initiative like this?

JLP: Musically speaking, the most difficult thing to address in this context is the classical singing voice. A lot of composers are actually not willing to use classically trained operatic voices because they seem very artificial to them. Ninety per cent of the music surrounding us has amplified voices and it's become hard for composers to imagine singing without microphones. So, what kind of opera will young directors and composers conceive for the future? Will they keep hanging on to the classical operatic voice? That's a big issue.

RA: I think things have changed already. Classically trained singers can also sing musicals and pop songs. Everything was so divided between light music, which is amplified, and classical, which isn't. Now it's all getting more mixed up. People come from a variety of backgrounds. The classical voice can be very versatile: they can sing very softly, with and without a microphone. So I'd hope that a trained singer would be able to sing in many different ways, and that singing training becomes a technical thing, rather than a matter of exclusive styles.

JLP: The stage directors felt pretty uncertain about their performance: they felt they couldn't judge it from their usual frame of reference. They were asking themselves whether it was a good piece, whether it was really valid. It would be helpful for them if stage directors and composers could find each other more easily.

RA: The student composers have been very enthusiastic about creating something other than concerts, but it's not easy for them to carry collaborations on.

The school is very demanding and they have to be very strong in order to do something unusual. What's frightening for them is that in this kind of project you're not entirely in control. If we were to pitch this project as an experiment that you're allowed to screw up, maybe that would reduce the pressure at the end when it comes to an audience watching.

JLP: Last year we said this was a project for the right side of the brain, for training your intuition, for making choices you can't yet articulate.

RA: For me it would be important to stretch out this process so that every composer has practical experience in the theatre and gets introduced into the theatrical theory, gets to see productions and gets involved in collaborative processes over a longer period of time. If we keep everything so compartmentalised in the school, I'm afraid we'll not be educating them for the real situation. Strangely enough, there's more time, more openness and more creativity in the professional world outside the conservatory. In opera as well as in the theatre, everything is set up to be creative and everyone is working towards one thing.

JLP: That's why I'm advocating an ongoing programme. Our opera project is a starting point, but of course I'm envisioning more continuity throughout the curriculums. One example might be an introduction to theatre history for composition students, right at the beginning of their study. The same goes for directing students: this year I've already been challenging them to develop their musical tastes. I'm asking them to think about the presence of music in their lives, in all the different contexts in which music is used. I'm encouraging them to tap into their own experiences with music and to find a vocabulary to exchange with composers. My goal is to realise contemporary productions more often with the Dutch National Opera Academy where we can include an orchestra and an ensemble of singers. The Opera Academy always wanted to do new work by student composers as well, and next season we'll actually be able to achieve that for the first time.

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What's in the AIR?

AIR in the world

The book *Zij aan zij, rug aan rug – produceren in de podiumkunsten* was produced in collaboration with AIR Paul Koek. It was launched at De Balie in Amsterdam as part of a public debate with Adriana Esmeijer, Kees Debets, Rachel Feuchtwang and Adelheid Roosen. Working with the entire SNDO student body, Benoît Lachambre presented the four-hour group performance *37 Solo's/Snake Charmers' Ball* at the Something Raw festival in Brakke Grond and Frascati theatre Amsterdam. And an adapted version *NIGHTWALKERS* was performed at Springdance festival. The theatrical installation inspired by AIR Ed Spanjaard and made by the Production and Stage Management course was open to the public at de Theaterschool. Ed Spanjaard conducted the Conservatorium van Amsterdam Symphony Orchestra.



AIR and research

ARTI research group produces the *RTRSCH* periodical under the auspices of the Art Practice and Development research group. This publication serves as an open platform for ARTI artistic researchers' projects, exploring their themes, processes and outcomes. Each issue is the product of a new combination of editor, content, format and method of distribution. Karen Lancel and Hermen Maat compiled *RTRSCH Vol 3 No 2: Tele_Trust 10 Steps to Create Your Own Networking Body*, which is also the title of their transdisciplinary research project that explores new parameters for online trust. *RTRSCH Vol. 4 No 1: Hospitality is Not a Home* was put together in collaboration with nine Film Masters students who for a period of six months explored the theme of hospitality.



AIR in the future

Sample and remix artist Eboman is joining the school for an intense project as AIR, working together with students and teachers at the Academy of Fine Art in Education and the Bachelor of Music in Education department at the Conservatorium. Over the course of one week the students will experiment with remixing self-made and found image and sound material. These experiments culminate in two performances. Eboman follows Terry Barrett as AIR at the Academy of Fine Art in Education – Barrett was AIR there from 2009 to 2010. Studio Makkink & Bey will be joining the AHK as AIRs at the master for Landscape Architecture at the Academy of Architecture. De Theaterschool, the Netherlands Film and Television Academy and the Reinwardt Academy have all announced new AIR initiatives.



In the next issue of ON AIR, which will appear in autumn 2012, we'll be taking an in-depth look at AIR Eboman's remix culture project and the work of the Academy of Architecture's AIR Studio Makkink & Bey on their field-works site-specific project in the North-East Polder.

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