

“Werktreue and Regieoper”, pp. 8-27 in Fiona Schopf (ed), *Music on Stage*.  
Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.  
Postprint

## CHAPTER

DANIEL MEYER-DINKGRÄFE

### *WERKTREUE AND REGIEOPER*

#### Terms

The debate regarding the role of the director in the context of an opera production has focused on the alleged binary opposite of *Werktreue* and *Regieoper* (applied to opera from the term coined in conjunction with theatre as *Regietheater*). *Werktreue* can be understood as the director’s commitment to do as much justice as possible to the perceived intentions of the composer and librettist in the process of translating the libretto from page to stage in conjunction with the conductor who is in charge of the score. The director becomes the servant of the art form, in the service of the librettist, as much as the conductor is in the service of the composer. Related terms are *traditional*, *conventional* and *orthodox*. *Regieoper*, in contrast, places emphasis on the ideas that the director develops inspired by, and in relation to the combination of libretto and score. The director is no longer anyone’s servant and develops an idea, often referred to as a concept, for the production and puts that idea or concept into practice over the rehearsal period. The historical development in opera is one from *Werktreue* to *Regieoper*, in parallel to the development within theatre: initially, the role of the director was to ensure singers or actors knew when to enter and exit the stage, leaving the activity of actors in theatre predominantly to improvisation, and not expecting from singers more than predominantly stationary delivery as close as possible to the ramp. According to Heeg, any binary is inappropriate that sets the work of art as it was originally intended, against the director’s personal arbitrariness (2008: 30). Semiotics defines the play text or libretto as a text in its own right; equally, the performance is a text in itself, following its own rules, and thus independent of the play text or libretto. The binary of *Werktreue* and *Regieoper* disappears in the context of these definitions (Balme 2008: 47-8). *W*

The opposition between the two comes into play if we consider results of the *Werktreue* approach as old-fashioned, lifeless, boring, and “fundamentalist in nature even if necessary for the discussion of opera and theatre” (Balme 2008: 43) and *Regieoper* as dynamic, associated with ideas, provocation and confrontation (Balme 2008: 43). The opposition can be found equally between the view of *Regieoper* as the apparent disregard for the original work, with traditionalists unable to see directorial decisions as resulting from, or as intrinsic to the work, but as superimposed arbitrarily on the work and thus artificial, an expression of decadence. In contrast to that view of *Regieoper*, *Werktreue* represents the view that the director’s role is to express for the audience the author’s perceived intentions without any conceptual superimposition of their own. As Heather MacDonald put it, productions following the *Werktreue* approach “allow the beauty of some of the most powerful music ever written to shine forth”. MacDonald, writing in 2007, associates many European, in particular German, directors with *Regieoper* and sets up the Metropolitan Opera House in New York as a bastion of the *Werktreue* approach.

#### Problems with *Regieoper*

What is so problematic about *Regieoper*? Allegedly, if directors engage in this mode of directing, much of the original is lost. MacDonald, for example, argues that *Regieoper* denies its audiences the “unimpeded experience of an art form of unparalleled sublimity” She locates the origins of opera in the seventeenth-century as an attempt by the Florentines “to recover the power of Greek tragedy, which united drama and song. Since then, opera has expressed a limitless range of human emotions, set to music of sometimes unbearable exquisiteness” (2007). Here is a longer passage from MacDonald to demonstrate the passion of the argument:

Without Mozart or Verdi, the Regietheater director is nothing; he cannot even hope for third-rate avant-garde status. In a world where displaying bodily fluids in jars, performing sex acts in public, or trampling religious symbols will land you a gig at the Venice Biennale and a government grant, the only source of outrage still available to the would-be scourge of propriety is to desecrate great works of art. (2007)

In general terms, this “depressing” phenomenon of *Regieoper*, MacDonald argues, “suggests a culture that cannot tolerate its own legacy of beauty and nobility” (2007). According to Klonovsky, *Regieoper* is characterised by an egalitarian view of history and people, epitomised by the word “downwards”: nothing is great, nothing is beautiful, nothing has turned out well, in particular no human being. The only acceptable perspective on important people is that of the valet (who does not understand or accept anything beyond his sphere), and great deeds are the results of addictions, vanity and inhibitions. The lowest common denominator is that all people have sex, and that needs to be presented on stage as a result. The existence of high culture is considered by leftist intellectuals, among whom Klonovsky counts representatives of *Regieoper*, as suspect and scandalous (n.d.)

Rather than remaining general, some critics provide details as to where libretto and score do not match directors’ choices: MacDonald, for example, writes about the 2011 Salzburg Festival production of Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro* by Claus Guth:

Lost, too, is the humor. The recognition scene, in which Figaro and Marcellina improbably discover their mother-son relationship, embodied Guth’s cluelessness about comic tradition. The repeated “Sua madre’s!” and “Tuo padre’s!” of the startled participants should be a moment of ebullient silliness, as indicated by the music’s mounting pitches, unbroken major harmonies, and accelerating tempo; instead, the characters stood around woodenly, looking uncomfortable, alienated, and glum. Figaro nervously cleaned his glasses rather than joyfully embrace his long-lost mother. The delightful fillip dissing the Count which ends the episode fell hollowly among this unhappy new family. Not surprisingly, the scene elicited not a chuckle from the audience on the night I saw it, nor was it apparently meant to—contrary to the patent intentions of Mozart and Da Ponte. (2011)

How do the singers and conductors respond to *Regieoper*? Writers opposed to this approach to opera directing in principle tend towards sweeping statements such as “singers, orchestra members, and conductors know how shameful the most self-indulgent opera productions are, and yet they are powerless to stop them” (MacDonald 2007). In fact, however, they seem not to have problems listing incidents where artists went on record with their dissatisfaction. Thus, MacDonald refers to baritone Sherrill Milnes and his appearance as Iago in a German production of Verdi’s *Otello*: the director asked him to come on stage during the third-act duet between Otello and Desdemona, crawl across the stage on his belly and engage in obvious masturbation.

Milnes was astounded. “I won’t do it, it’s wrong on every front,” he remembers responding. “At the very least, it’s rude to interrupt the focal point of the scene between Desdemona and Otello. It’s not about Iago’s reaction.” (In fact, Iago is not even supposed to be onstage.) “No way I’ll put my hand on my crotch; it’s embarrassing for Sherrill Milnes and it’s embarrassing for Sherrill Milnes as Iago.” But Milnes gave ground: “I came on the stage, but not as long as the director wanted, breathed a little hard and exited.” (2007)

MacDonald also refers to soprano Diana Damrau and her involvement in the infamous Bavarian State Opera *Rigoletto*, set on the Planet of the Apes.

“I fulfilled my contract,” she says scornfully. “This was superficial rubbish. You try to prepare yourself for a production, you read secondary literature and mythology. Here, we had to watch *Star Wars* movies and different versions of *The Planet of the Apes*. . . . This was just . . . noise.” (2007).

In 2010, Carl St Clair resigned from his post as general music director of the Komische Oper Berlin in protest against the *Regieoper* approach prevalent at the house. He had been critical of the *Regieoper* approach for some time, but the last straw came with Benedikt von Peter’s production of *Fidelio*. St Clair commented: “In this particular production I experienced what I would consider the darkest side of Regietheater, where the back of Beethoven was used for a concept. . . . This concept used and abused Beethoven’s greatness in a way that was very disturbing to me.” (Mangan 2010).

### **In defence of *Regieoper***

*Regieoper* finds many voices in its defence, which tend to be as sophisticated as those defending violence on screen or extreme body art among performance installations. A closer look at alleged analysis in favour, or even in defence of *Regieoper* tends to reveal much detailed description of offending productions, which is equally present in texts against *Regieoper*, in addition to phrases that reveal hermetically sealed jargon: Steier’s comment on Bieito’s 2003 production of Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* is a suitable example.

Setting the piece in a glittery, violent, vaguely eastern European whorehouse, peppered with guns, drugs, and all varieties of bodily fluid and physical assault, Bieito cut through any sentimental/contextual membrane protecting the opera from the stomach-churning brutality of such modern phenomena as human trafficking and snuff-films. In addition to the unswervingly committed cast, the Komische Oper hired 15 professional adult entertainers to fill out the sordid aesthetic texture of Bieito’s vision. (2004)

What precisely a membrane of any further description (here: “sentimental/contextual”) in relation to an opera? What does the specific descriptor “sentimental / contextual” mean, precisely? What is the relationship between this

particular opera and modern phenomena such as “human trafficking and snuff films”, precisely? What is the purpose of the employment of “professional adult entertainers”, precisely? In each case, the argument lacks precision and does not hold up to scrutiny.

It is not necessary to hide behind such jargon. In her introduction to a collection of interviews with opera directors, many of them in the *Regieoper* category, Beyer considers the question important as to what the director wants to achieve with his or her production, and differentiates between intended provocation of the spectator, conscious irritation of habits of thinking, seeing and hearing, and consensus. On the basis of interviews with fourteen opera directors, first published in 2005, Beyer concludes that there is agreement that the directors’ task is to prove, again and with commitment, that, and how, music theatre can have a meaningful impact on its audience (2007: 15). Beyer emphasises that all the directors that feature in her book share their serious dedication to the operas they work on, their belief in the dialogue, and their love for and of opera (2007: 19).

In line with this argument, directors associated by the critics with *Regieoper* refuse to be categorised in this way. They insist that they work predominantly intuitively with their teams of singers and designers predominantly during, and not before, the rehearsal process, and do not superimpose a concept on to the opera in question, but develop their ideas in relation to the libretto and music, even if in contrast. Peter Konwitschny is an example. He says:

I do not consider myself a representative of the *Regietheater*. Often, these directors present one single idea, such as for example staging *Rigoletto* in an empty swimming pool or in a slaughterhouse. These ideas are not consequentially followed through and explored, and in most cases, the singers stand next to each other on stage just as unconnected as in conventional productions. My stagings, on the other hand, aim to return to the roots: to get to the core of the pieces, through the jungle of interpretative traditions, which in most cases, have distorted the pieces. The accusation that this is “too intellectual for the average viewer” is absurd and exposes the enemies of such theatre as opposing new insights. (2009)

Katharina Wagner, too, claims that she does not direct in order to provoke. She directs from within the piece, to bring out what she sees in it, and what it has to say today in relation to changes across its reception history. It is then left to each spectator to select any specific aspect they want to talk about in discussions of the production—there are many aspects on offer in her production, not limited to the role of the work in the Third Reich. In addition there is the thought of the general discourse on art: what is art in the first place? Who defines what art is, and what can art achieve in the spectator? (Steinbach 2011)

Many representatives of *Regieoper* thus claim not to be provocative intentionally. However, what *Regieoper* does, according to Heeg, (and this applies to *Regieoper* as well), is to challenge the great canonical works of theatre and opera by confronting them with the demands of the present and limited life, searching for the aspects in those works that have been left incomplete, or have not been thought through to their ends, due to the different times they were created in (2008: 31). He locates the advantage or strength of *Regieoper* in its examination of the past, its new interpretation and new definition of cultural self-image, in order to create cultural identity in times of crisis (33).

This approach may come across as provocative to an audience. In terms of audiences, Beyer differentiates between spectators for whom opera continues to be a hideaway from reality, an expression of their yearning for a feeling of security, and a place where feelings appear genuine, honest and strong and can be acted out without existential hazard. For others, opera is a means to ascertain the continuation of traditional values (2007: 18-19). Briegleb takes this argument in terms of audiences further, assuming that the yearning for theatre and opera that is “decent” is equivalent to the desire for comprehensible and stringent narrative. Against that background he argues that the difference between what he calls *alive* and *lethargic intellectualism* lies in the readiness, or unwillingness, to accept the stress caused by being confronted with theatre that is not easily understood, in the sense of the statement of theatre director Frank Baumbauer that theatre has to be straining (2008: 83). In turn, stringent narratives invite recognition and identification, and spectators stop thinking on their own. The cinema, Briegleb muses, is much more suitable to serve this mode of reception. (2008: 85). This argument seems to imply that it is the fault of the spectator if they dislike what they see in the opera house, because such dislike is characteristic of *intellectual lethargy*. Anders, too, takes up the perspective of the spectator, proposing that *Regieoper* plays with the spectator’s expectations, provokes through new forms and cannot be digested easily by the spectator (2008: 117). Walburg places himself in the position of a spectator: “If I see *Macbeth* and it is set in the job centre, then I do not understand it. Someone tries to garner attention with something that does not make sense” (Kaiser et al., 2010: 33-34). Khuon, finally, insists that his theatre wants to avoid an audience leaving with the feeling that they have understood everything, and it was somehow great, but unable to remember even the contents after only two days (2008: 63).

Schmidt proposes avoiding the dead end of quarrel implied by the conventional, negative association of *Regieoper* by considering what we might hope and expect from *Regieoper* (2008: 71). One is the expectation that art opens up new spaces for experience. The director needs to be prepared to have his / her certainties shattered by getting in touch with the essence of the opera. If that were the case, we would not only question opera, but we would allow those operas to question us (2008: 77-78). Briegleb takes this consideration of the expectations regarding *Regieoper* further by suggesting how *Regieoper* could work best: he is in favour of complex narration, and sees two obstacles to its success: first, access to opera cannot be assumed any longer to be enabled by a common canon of signs and education. Secondly, directors sometimes confuse the foreign with the private (2008: 86).

The overall argument that emerges from these multiple positions is that self-indulgent work, and concepts that do not make sense because they do not relate to the spectator but are private to the director are not what *Regieoper* should

be all about. Rather, *Regieoper* should be understood as the director's attempt to enable the audience, through their work, to think about the issues presented in the opera for themselves in a contemporary context. Gutjahr sums this up in her comment that *Regieoper* implies a new role for the director, close to that of an author; rather than reconstructing and interpreting an opera that claims sacrosanct status, directors develop a new conceptualisation of the stage experience, in which the opera hypertext is exposed to multiple exchanges with discourses, arts and media (2008: 22).

### *Werktreue*

Opposition against, and justifications and explanations of *Regieoper* are frequently contextualised in relation to the concept of *Werktreue*. In that set of binary opposites, the call for *Werktreue* has been presented as a yearning for an irretrievable past, with its traditional understanding of art and culture, in which opera becomes the location of everything true, good and beautiful. Heeg understands such yearning not so much as a left-over of the “eternally of yesterday”, but as a reaction of fear of and escape from the loss of a collective cultural identity in view of current trends of fragmentation (2008: 29-30). Balme takes this argument further and identifies the understanding of *Werktreue* as the inappropriate yearning for an irretrievable past as essentially fundamentalist in nature. *Werktreue*, (mis-)understood as a desire for unrestricted obedience, implies a disposition towards absolutes, which is in opposition to freedom of the arts and is close to fundamentalism (Balme 2008: 43). Linguistic studies reveal that the term *Werktreue* was first used in the Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* in 1935 with reference to Furtwängler conducting Beethoven (Balme 2008: 45).

The views by eminent German theatre actor and director Gustaf Gründgens (1899-1963) are of particular interest in this context as he is widely considered a major proponent and representative of the *Werktreue* approach in the very early days of the debate. A statement of 1930, in which actor Gründgens writes about director Gründgens, provides evidence that the spectator is at the centre of Gründgens's theatre aesthetics: spectators should be able to understand what the actors say; for actors to say the words of the text in such a way that the spectators are able to understand them, the actors in turn need to understand what the dramatist is saying. The purpose of the director for Gründgens is to get out of the play and the actors whatever is within them, and in his practice he is fanatical about precision and an enemy of anything coincidental, unclear and uncontrollable (1963: 12-3). The emphasis on the spectator implies a specific perspective on *Werktreue*: it does not mean, for example, staging Goethe's *Faust* without cuts, in a performance lasting for seven hours, but to make cuts so as to make the play more accessible to an audience that may not have the patience for the uncut work (1963: 23). Contemporary director Michael Thalheimer, too, emphasises that *Werktreue* does not necessarily mean, or at least imply, faithfulness to the (full, uncut) text of the original play (2008: 192).

In working on a production, for Gründgens any personal opinions take a background position, and he works solely to make the best of the context of work, time and actors. He endeavours to track down the play, to make its dramaturgy his own, and to find the style, mask and movement that are its own. Finally, he endeavours to give the actors security in performing without ambiguity all those aspects of the play, which he discovers together with them. (1963: 29). Thus the work of the director is never an end in itself, but only ever a means towards an end, with the director as the mediator between play and audience. Gründgens was convinced that it is very easy indeed to direct a production in such a way that it becomes a scandal. To create something from nothing is an example of cheap art, while it is much more difficult to create something from something (1963: 141-2).

In a speech of 1948 to the German Stage Association, with the rebuilding of the German theatre landscape after the Second World War in mind, Gründgens emphasised the need for productions that follow the *Werktreue* approach. He defined it as the requirement to interpret the play as it was intended by the author. The director's creativity does not mean for the directors to put themselves on stage together with the play; rather, creativity begins where the director is able to exemplify in a production on stage the dramatist's vision and desire, and possibly to boost it. In this context, Gründgens argues that at that particular time in German theatre history, it is not important whether productions are good or bad, but whether they are right or wrong—whether it is possible to recognise, unambiguously, a specific play even if the production is only of moderate quality, or whether all that is recognisable are the director's vanity and ignorance. Even the most self-centred conductor is bound by the score, and the director should be bound by the play text. Gründgens pleads with directors to be rather less glowing but right, than fascinating but wrong (1963: 161-2).

With closer analysis, the concepts of *Werktreue* and *Regieoper* appear to be less of binary opposites than much discussion seems to imply. Both have at their heart the desire to bring the opera in question as close as possible to the spectator, to engage the spectators, to make them relate to the opera, be that by feeling uplifted by the beauty and sublime nature of the work (which is allegedly achieved better by a *Werktreue* approach), or by thinking critically about the opera and the contemporary relevance of its contents (which is allegedly achieved better by a *Regieoper* approach). In the next section of this chapter, I describe and discuss a recent production of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* to exemplify some of the debate surveyed so far.

### *Tristan und Isolde* in Minden, Germany

There is a Richard Wagner Association in Minden, Germany, a town of 83,000 inhabitants on the river Weser in North-Rhine Westphalia. There is also a municipal theatre in the town, built in 1908 and refurbished in 2012. The theatre does not have its own company, it is a receiving house only. In 2002, Jutta Hering-Winckler, a solicitor in Minden and chair of the Richard Wagner Association, arranged a professional production of *Der Fliegende Holländer* to be produced in Minden and performed at the municipal theatre. In 2005, a production of *Tannhäuser* followed, in 2009 came *Lohengrin*, and *Tristan und Isolde* in 2012. The music on all four productions was provided by the *Nordwestdeutsche Philharmonie*, conducted by Frank Beermann. The production had been publicised, in the local newspaper, with special reference to Matthias von Stegmann as the director as a guarantor of the *Werktreue* approach. Von Stegmann had worked for many years as an assistant director at the Bayreuth Festival, including with Wolfgang Wagner on numerous productions. He had assisted Wagner also for the 1997 production of *Lohengrin* at the New National Theatre in Tokyo, where he returned to direct his own productions of *Der Fliegende Holländer* (2009) and *Lohengrin* (2012). Von Stegmann has been known, in Germany, as an actor in dubbing; he has written German dubbing scripts, and directed dubbing; in particular, he has been in charge of the German dubbing of *The Simpsons* (translation and direction) for a number of years now.

In one of the numerous articles in the local newspaper, *Mindener Tageblatt*, prior to the opening night on 8 September 2012, von Stegmann pointed out that he does not always consider the intellectualising of certain contents as healthy. For *Tristan und Isolde*, the spectator must take part in the life and the suffering (Koch 2012a). The set for the production supports this directorial approach, designed by Frank Phillip Schlößmann, who created the set design for the most recent production of Wagner's *Ring* cycle for the Bayreuth Festival. The orchestra pit in the Minden municipal theatre is too small to accommodate an 80 musician Wagner orchestra. Thus the pit was covered and the opera's action took place on top of it. In this constellation of the theatre space, the singers were literally within reach of spectators of the front row. Von Stegmann considered this proximity as a danger, but also an exciting challenge to develop the level of authenticity needed for spectators so close to the singers to believe their emotions fully and at every moment (Koch 2012a). Some of von Stegmann's explanations to the singers at the first rehearsal were documented in the *Mindener Tageblatt*: "I want pure emotion up there. That will be demanding. At every second you need to know what you are doing and why you are doing it". With regard to the proximity of stage and spectators, he pointed out that "large gesture of opera will not work", and advises the singers to "think in filmic terms: the end result should look like Chekhov or Strindberg". Von Stegmann emphasised again that he does not want to hide behind a concept that he superimposes on the opera from the outside. He told his singers that they would all get to their emotional limits in working with this opera, but assured them that he was on their side. (Koch 2012b).

The orchestra was further back on the stage, and separated from the stage space allocated to the action by a gauze. The orchestra was thus in full view of the audience. The stage floor was built as a slope, rising towards the back of the stage. The front part, up unto the gauze, was made from wooden floor boards painted in a light lilac colour. At the very back of the stage, behind the orchestra, was a screen on to which different shades and colours of light were projected, in line with the music and the plot. Overall, the set created the image of a ship, with the screen shaped as the bow, and the auditorium as the stern, with the stage up to the gauze as the main back part of the ship and the conductor as the helmsman. Within this image of a stylised ship, the breath of the audience could be considered almost as the wind in the ship's sails.

When the audience entered the auditorium, the stage was open to view fully, lit by the lights in the auditorium. The orchestra musicians were at their desks behind the gauze, which was lit blue. When the house lights went down, the lights on stage came on, Isolde took her place in one of the boats, Brangäne sat near another boat, and Kurwenal was in the background. The conductor arrived, the overture started. Isolde was reading in a book, not quite able to concentrate, a number of books were piled on the floor next to the boat she was in, she flipped the pages, read here and there, nervous, agitated, possibly bored. Real life took place in front of our eyes: music, set, changing light, singers, singing, libretto, facial expressions, gestures, glances, all became one, illustrating in surprising detail what is likely the genuine meaning of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, total work of art.

Repeated viewing could possibly allow spectators to pick up on, and remember, all of the minute detail of what happened on stage. Most striking moments included the way Tristan and Isolde behaved when they had drunk the love potion instead of the death drink. Both became love-struck teenagers, in very different, but clearly masculine and feminine ways, respectively, very moving and only slightly comical, so as not to distract from the serious nature of the situation as highly problematic within the opera's overall plot. Neither could help the power of the potion, neither was able to "think straight" any more, all they knew was the attraction to each other, which is love in both a spiritual sense, as eros, and a physical sense as sexuality. The production managed to make this holistic level of their experience clear, for example when Tristan and Isolde moved closer to each other as if to kiss, only for Isolde to break away from the kiss when their lips were almost touching, to place her face on Tristan's chest in a loving embrace.

Kurwenal was very surprised at what he observed, helpless, confused, and the realisation of what she had caused hit Brangäne quite visibly. Both had to use the maximum physical strength they had available to literally tear Tristan and Isolde apart so as to keep up appearances when King Marke arrived. When Marke discovered Tristan and Isolde at the end of Act II, the colour of Isolde's dress matched that of Marke's coat and suit. While Marke lamented Tristan's betrayal, sitting on the sea trunk, Isolde came over to him and sat next to him, sad at his suffering, sad that it was caused by her, but at the same time not showing any signs of feeling guilty: she was under the influence of the love

potion, and was thus not responsible for Marke's misery, and neither was Tristan. There is no conflict here for her, or for Tristan.

At the beginning of Act III, we saw Tristan resting in a derelict boat; Kurwenal was busy washing out bloodied bandages from Tristan's wounds. There were many of them, and they were quite bloody, and Kurwenal tried his best with them, without achieving much. It is an image for the moving care that Kurwenal took of Tristan, but it showed also the helplessness of the rather rough man in carrying out this work that he probably never thought he would be doing: he was awkward with the movements, clumsy, quite inefficient, without any idea of hygiene, as one would expect from a man like him, but the fact that he still tried, and tried so obviously hard to do something almost against his very nature was genuinely moving.

Contrary to the ending of the opera as suggested in the libretto, according to which Isolde sinks, in Brangäne's arms, on top of Tristan's corpse, in the Minden production Isolde left the stage in very bright white light.

It is revealing to analyse the way critics wrote about this production. Some notice and convey a brief impression of the detail of the character's actions and motivations. Critics described some of the nuances of the production with regard to the singers, generally pointing to their intensity and authenticity (Helming 2012), and describing Andreas Schager's Tristan as a boisterous, passionate firebrand and dare-devil, whose ego does not have space for self-doubt (Helming 2012), and noting the tear that Dara Hobbs sheds as Isolde during her *Liebestod* at the end of the opera (Groenewold 2012). Other details noted by the critics included the splinter from Morold's sword that Isolde wore as a memento on a necklace, with Tristan entering with the rest of the sword (Brockmann 2012). In a detailed review in *Der Neue Merker*, Pfabigan comments very favourably on a phenomenal person direction renders every breath, every glance, every step and every phrase into a spectator's very personal experience.

Critics also note the imaginative, detailed use of light throughout the production, such as velvety blue for the love scene in Act II, complete with starry sky that changes its light constellation in line with music and libretto. The skeleton of a boat that hung high from the ceiling over the orchestra in Act III, was lit red during Tristan's long monologue of suffering (Groenewold 2012). Groenewold refers to the production as a concentrated psychodrama, in which the effort to choreograph movements, gestures and glances as naturally and precisely as possible is evident, so as not to allow pathos to seep in. She attests a fine sense of stage dynamics, and awareness of the power of calmness to von Stegmann (2012). In her review in the national newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Eleonore Büning concludes that has been a long time since audiences were able to see emotion on stage and not only in the music (2012). Brockmann combines observation of detail with more general writing, emphasising what the director did not do rather than what he did, or what the effect may have been of what he did: von Stegmann told the story *without* wrong additions, interpretations, or references to Wagner's biography (2012). Helming describes the production in general terms as "directorial chamber theatre" and adds that it "abstains from updating and re-interpretations characteristic of *Regietheater*" (2012). Similarly, Manuel Brug in the national newspaper *Die Welt* calls von Stegmann's production simple but moving, with nothing negative distracting from them music (2012).

Thus, the reviews of the Minden *Tristan und Isolde* praise the production; some descriptions of some instances of detail, other combine general comments with indications that the high quality of the production was achieved because of various things the director could have done but did not do, fortunately. Altogether, however, it is fair to say that directors of the *Regieoper* category can expect to get many more words for their concept and its details, even if that does not entail praise. Such an imbalance of direct critical attention to the director's work raises the question to what extent sparse comments on a director's high level of praiseworthy, but (!) uncontroversial achievement, in comparison to more detailed and precise comments on controversial *Regieoper* directors, do in fact tempt or seduce particularly younger directors to abandon any attempt at *Werktreue* in favour of *Regieoper*. Remember that according to Gründgens, not much effort is needed to direct a scandal, and if that brings more public attention, as measured by lines, or time, allocated to the production in the media, why bother with the eminently greater effort it takes to direct a genuinely moving, emotionally rich production? Both national reviews, by the way, misspell the name of the tenor (Schager becomes Schlager and Scharger, respectively).

Von Stegmann emphasised in interviews that several aspects of his production were based on gut feeling and intuition rather than intellectually conceived in terms of a concept. The violet colour of the wooden floor boards is an example, as is Isolde's exit at the end of the opera. In the latter he was inspired by the music, which does not suggest sadness any longer, but calm departure and closure: she is liberated, it is almost a kind of apotheosis, a dissolving. It may be that she dies, or that she moves into a different dimension,

### Spirituality perspective

Some productions, according to some spectators, miss, in some instances by far, the spirit of the libretto and the music. However, even directors who admit to being, and wanting to be, provocative, insist that they are directing in line with the spirit of both libretto and music, with the overall aim of making the opera in question relevant to themselves, their team and the audience. I will not discuss further the conspiracy theory that "dark forces" take hold of the some directors and twist their minds in such a way as to allow the least possible amount of bright, positive spiritual energy potentially contained in an opera through to the performance, so as to deprive both team and audiences of that potential positive spiritual energy, and to fill the production and reception experiences in turn with negative, dark energy conducive and nourishing to themselves. I also discard the possibility that those provocative directors are

disingenuous when they claim to be inspired by the spirit of the opera (music and / or libretto) in their approach that is considered distant from that same spirit by some spectators and critics.

In some cases, critics at least seem to grow accustomed to an initially confusing directorial concept, or consider the confusing elements, or those they consider distracting or out of tune with the libretto and / or music, as secondary and pardonable in view of a very strong direction relating to the interactions of the characters. Neuenfels's production of *Lohengrin* for the Bayreuth Festival, launched in 2010, is a good example: in this production, the opera is set in a laboratory, with the chorus of Brabantian noblemen and women made up of rats. When Lohengrin, at the end of the opera, reveals Elsa's brother, Gottfried, as returned from the Grail, Gottfried emerges from an egg, complete with umbilical cord, as an adult-shaped baby, some disgusting alien creature from a horror movie. The production's overall concept and some of its details caused concern, confusion, and disagreement at first; however, Neuenfels's way of interpreting and conveying the interaction of characters, especially Lohengrin and Elsa in the bridal chamber scene at the beginning of Act III, was indeed very strong, for example Lohengrin's deep sadness when Elsa has asked the forbidden question. In addition, while the concept of this production was provocative and unexpected, Neuenfels was able to be consistent within it, while a good number of other provocative productions fail to achieve such consistency. Thus one criterion of whether a *Regieoper* production "works", in the sense that the intended provocation leads the spectator to think critically about the vision presented in the production, or to reject the production without further thought, might be whether the production is still able to tell a story consistently, stringently and convincingly.

An opera will be able to trigger a range of responses in different directors who consider directing it. Such responses will depend on the nature of the individual director in relation to the opera itself. The director's nature is particularly interesting with regard to the different percentages to which their masculine and their feminine sides have developed, and, related to that, to what extent their creative activities are influenced, possibly dominated, by the analytic, masculine, left or the synthetic, feminine, holistic right hemispheres of their brains. I have pointed out elsewhere (Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2011) that according to certain spiritual traditions, such as that of ascended master St Germain (2010), the purpose for souls to incarnate as humans on planet Earth is for them to learn to develop the feminine side of their nature, and have argued that opera serves to develop the feminine side of humans, associated with the right hemisphere. *Werktreue* productions are better placed to achieve that aim. This argument is based on the assumption that music for opera has been composed, and the libretto written, intuitively, by the composer and librettist respectively, in unconscious service to this overarching aim. If we set this as the axiom, then the approaches to conducting and directing that seek to get as much as possible out of the score and libretto *on their own terms*, are likely to achieve development of the production team and audience's feminine sides to a larger extent than productions not governed by this aim. From the opposite angle, if a director adheres to a *Regieoper* approach, and seeks to put on stage ideas triggered by, or in relation to the opera (i.e., on the director's own terms, rather than that of the score and libretto), this approach will be dominated by masculine, left hemisphere influences and the potential for developing the feminine side inherent in the opera will not be fulfilled.

This argument implies that many people appear opposed to the *Regieoper* approach ultimately because that approach tends to shirk the purpose of opera to develop the human feminine side. The argument also explains why cogent and interesting character direction within an overall *Regieoper* approach serves to mitigate objection: such character direction picks up elements of the opera more inherent in the music and libretto, and thus more conducive to developing the feminine side of the spectators than other, non-inherent and superimposed *Regieoper* aspects conceived by the director's left brain and masculine side.

Kirsten Harms is an example for an opera director who sees a difference between her own approach to directing compared with that of her male colleagues: she draws conflicts in opera differently than her male colleagues. Many male colleagues, for example, see *Tannhäuser*, as the conflict of a man to decide between the holy woman and the whore. While this level of interpretation may have been interesting for the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Harms believes that the piece says much more fundamental things about the nature of love. She was interested in the archetypal constellations in the relationship between man and woman that represent obstacles to happiness. Ultimately the characters break down in view of an image of woman that is too far from reality: a woman is expected to be both sexually attractive and a lone, chaste ideal. The discrepancy between these two cannot be bridged, and that ruins Tannhäuser and Wolfram just as much as Venus-Elisabeth. For this reason it was natural for the same singer to portray both facets of this image of a woman. (Königsdorf 2008).

## Conclusion

The terms and related concepts of *Regieoper* and *Werktreue* do not serve much purpose any more for discussion and critical analysis of opera productions as long as they are used in their conventional connotations as binary opposites. Directors who explore an opera on its own terms, can achieve a very exciting, thought-provoking and moving event, as von Stegmann's *Tristan und Isolde* production in Minden demonstrates. Similarly, directors who are inspired by a given opera to explore it in different terms can achieve an equally engaging, interesting, thought-provoking and moving event. Examples for this are the widely praised *Parsifal* production by Stefan Herheim for the Bayreuth Festival, or his cogent presentation of *Tannhäuser* in Oslo, although it may not work every time for the same director (for example Herheim's *Lohengrin* in Berlin). The criterion of critical success for a production that seems to deviate from the original context of the opera is the extent to which the new interpretation, or revisioning of the opera, is

consistent and cogent within the parameters it sets for itself in making sense of the contents as specified in the libretto and further developed in the music. Thus the context is still determined by the opera itself: as soon as the director transgresses such a cogent and consistent operatic context, which may be obvious immediately or become obvious only with some further thought, in favour of private contexts that remain private, the production itself becomes arbitrary and unengaging for those (many) spectators who do not happen to know the private context at the origin of such a production. From the perspective of spiritual development, finally, both exploration of the opera *per se*, and stringent narrative for a revisioning of the opera serve the purpose of allowing opera to fulfil its spiritual purpose, of developing the feminine aspect of members of the production team and of spectators.

## Bibliography

- Anders, Sonja. 2008. Mitte – Rampe – vorn: Jedem sein Regietheater. Über Zuschauerreaktionen auf Thalheimer-Inszenierungen. In *Regietheater! Wie sich über Inszenierungen streiten last*, ed. Ortrud Gutjahr, 115-124. Würzburg: Königshausen.
- Balme, Christopher. 2008. Werktreue. Aufstieg und Niedergang eines fundamentalistischen Begriffs. In *Regietheater! Wie sich über Inszenierungen streiten last*, ed. Ortrud Gutjahr, 43-52. Würzburg: Königshausen.
- Beyer, Barbara (ed.) 2007. *Warum Oper? Gespräche mit Opernregisseuren*. Berlin: Alexander.
- Brockmann, Sigi. 2012. Minden: Tristan und Isolde—Premiere. *Der neue Merker*. <http://www.der-neue-merker.eu/minden-tristan-und-isolde-premiere> (Accessed on 16 September 2012).
- Briegleb, Till. Wer anständiges Theater will, soll ins Kino gehen. Ein Plädoyer für die komplexe Narration. In *Regietheater! Wie sich über Inszenierungen streiten last*, ed. Ortrud Gutjahr, 81-92. Würzburg: Königshausen.
- Brug, Manfred. 2012. Liebestod im Lippischen. *Die Welt*. 12 September. <http://www.welt.de/kultur/musik/article109156791/Liebestod-im-Lippischen.html>. (Accessed on 16 September 2012).
- Büning, Eleonore. 2012. Hier weht Bayreuths Fahne auf dem Dach. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 11 September. <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buehne-und-konzert/richard-wagner-in-minden-hier-weht-bayreuths-fahne-auf-dem-dach-11885449.html> (Accessed on 16 September 2012).
- Groenewold, Anke. 2012. Ekstatische Reise: Ein Erlebnis: Richard Wagners “Tristan und Isolde” in Stadttheater Minden. *Neue Westfälische Zeitung*, 10 September. [http://www.nw-news.de/owl/kultur/7022790\\_Ekstatische\\_Reise.html](http://www.nw-news.de/owl/kultur/7022790_Ekstatische_Reise.html) (Accessed 8 November 2012).
- Gründgens, Gustaf. 1963. *Wirklichkeit des Theaters*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Gutjahr, Ortrud (ed). 2008. *Regietheater! Wie sich über Inszenierungen streiten last*. Würzburg: Königshausen.
- Heeg, Günther. Die Zeitgenossenschaft des Theaters. In *Regietheater! Wie sich über Inszenierungen streiten last*, ed. Ortrud Gutjahr, 29-42. Würzburg: Königshausen.
- Helming, Christian. 2012. Premiere für ‘Tristan und Isolde’: Kammerspiel und Sinnenrausch. *Mindener Tageblatt*. 10 September. [http://www.mt-online.de/start/video/lokale\\_videos/7031059\\_Premiere\\_fuer\\_Tristan\\_und\\_Isolde\\_Kammerspiel\\_und\\_Sinnenrausch.html](http://www.mt-online.de/start/video/lokale_videos/7031059_Premiere_fuer_Tristan_und_Isolde_Kammerspiel_und_Sinnenrausch.html) (Accessed 16 September 2012).
- Kaiser, Joachim, Ulrich Khuon, Peter Kümmel, Lars-Ole Walburg, Manfred Osten. 2010. *Regietheater – Theaterregie. Zur Lage des deutschen Theaters*. Berlin: Theater der Zeit.
- Kauffmann, Bernd. 2010. *Regietheater—Theaterregie: Zur Lage des deutschen Theaters*. Berlin: Theater der Zeit.
- Khuon, Ulrich. 2008. Abhängigkeiten im Regietheater: Über Regisseure, Schauspieler und theatralische Lügen. In *Regietheater! Wie sich über Inszenierungen streiten last*, ed. Ortrud Gutjahr, 53-60. Würzburg: Königshausen.
- Klonovsky, Michael. N.d. Herunter, Herunter. <http://www.michael-klonovsky.de/content/view/104/42/> (Accessed 8 November 2012).
- Koch, Ursula. 2012a. Zuschauer sollen mitleben und mitleiden. *Mindener Tageblatt*. 21 April, p. 21. [http://www.mt-online.de/lokales/kultur/6621513\\_Tristan\\_und\\_Isolde\\_-\\_Zuschauer\\_sollen\\_mitleben\\_und\\_mitleiden.html](http://www.mt-online.de/lokales/kultur/6621513_Tristan_und_Isolde_-_Zuschauer_sollen_mitleben_und_mitleiden.html) (Accessed 16 September 2012).
- Koch, Ursula. 2012b. Erste Tuchfühlung mit der Mindener Bühne. *Mindener Tageblatt* 4 August 2012, p. 27. [http://www.mt-online.de/lokales/kultur/6930162\\_Proben\\_zu\\_der\\_Eigenproduktion\\_Tristan\\_und\\_Isolde\\_starten.html](http://www.mt-online.de/lokales/kultur/6930162_Proben_zu_der_Eigenproduktion_Tristan_und_Isolde_starten.html) (Accessed 16 September 2012).
- Königsdorf, Jörg. 2008. Quotendenken und Entdeckerlust – Im Gespräch mit Kirsten Harms. *Classic-Card*. November. [http://www.classiccard.de/de\\_DE/home/interview/78422/5](http://www.classiccard.de/de_DE/home/interview/78422/5). (Accessed 15 September 2012).
- Konwitschny, Peter. 2007. Wir bauen die Katastrophen nach. In 2007. *Warum Oper? Gespräche mit Opernregisseuren*, ed. Barbara Beyer, 21-40. Berlin: Alexander.
- MacDonald, Heather. 2007. The Abduction of Opera. *City Journal*. Summer. [http://www.city-journal.org/html/17\\_3\\_urbanities-regietheater.html](http://www.city-journal.org/html/17_3_urbanities-regietheater.html) (Accessed 16 September 2012).
- MacDonald, Heather. 2011. Regietheater Takes Another Scalp. *City Journal*. 24 August. <http://www.city-journal.org/2011/bc0824hm.html> (Accessed 16 September 2012).
- Mangan, Timothy. 2010. Ambushed by Regietheater ‘Fidelio’, St.Clair quits Berlin. *The Orange County Register*. 13 May. <http://artsblog.ocregister.com/2010/05/13/ambushed-by-regietheater-fidelio-st-clair-quits-berlin/29309/> (Accessed 15 September 2012).
- Ostermeier, Thomas. 2008. “...die Selbstbefeiung des Regietheaters von Moden”. Ein Interview. In *Regietheater! Wie sich über Inszenierungen streiten last*, ed. Ortrud Gutjahr, 155-170. Würzburg: Königshausen.
- Pfabigan, Sieglinde. 2012. Minden: Tristan und Isolde. *Der Neue Merker*. October. <http://www.der-neue-merker.eu/minden-tristan-und-isolde> (Accessed 21 September 2012).
- Schmidt, Christopher. 2008. Geist, der stets bejaht. Regietheater in der Konsensfalle. In *Regietheater! Wie sich über Inszenierungen streiten last*, ed. Ortrud Gutjahr, 71-80. Würzburg: Königshausen.



- Skramstad, Per-Eric. 2011. Peter Konwitschny: I do not consider myself a representative of the *Regietheater*. <http://www.wagneropera.net/Interviews/Peter-Konwitschny-Interview-2009.htm> (Accessed 15 September 2012).
- Saint Germain. 2004. *Das Tor zum Goldenen Zeitalter*. Seon: ChFalk.
- Steier, Lydia. 2004. Shock and awe in the German capitol. Online draft. 24 July. [http://www.striporama.com/steier\\_kids/Eine\\_Schande.htm](http://www.striporama.com/steier_kids/Eine_Schande.htm) (Accessed 16 September 2012).
- Steinbach, Ludwig. 2011. In Bayreuth wird die Erinnerung geweckt. *Musenblätter*. 27 July. <http://www.musenblaetter.de/artikel.php?aid=8981&suche=>. (Accessed 15 September 2012).
- Thalheimer, Michael. 2008. "...diese Arbeit am pulsierenden Zentrum des Stückes". Ein Interview. In *Regietheater! Wie sich über Inszenierungen streiten last*, ed. Ortrud Gutjahr, 189-202. Würzburg: Königshausen.