

“Technology and Mediation in Manfred Stahnke’s *Orpheus Kristall* (2001)

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In Manfred Stahnke’s 2001 *Orpheus Kristall*, a German opera in two media for stage and remote musicians, he presents an autistic Orpheus bewildered within the complexity of a multimedia environment. The hallucinating Orpheus, struggling with his thoughts, seeks his lost self-identity amidst his immediate world and its extension represented by the use of Internet. He reacts to the incoming sounds that emerge from the Internet in an attempt to get to know and locate himself in this media-world. He is trapped within his thoughts until three imaginary Eurydice characters appear on stage, confronting him and his hallucinations of the most traumatic event in his life: the “[loss of] his Eurydice.” As he attempts to face his memories, express his thoughts, and cope with his loss, he constantly endeavors to remember what happened to his Eurydice, throughout the course of the opera. In this pioneering work, Stahnke extends the borders of live music on stage with the integration of a vast external world through the Internet as a part of the performance medium. I argue that the Internet, as a technological artifact, embodies the role of mediation in *Orpheus Kristall*, clarifying the allegorical relationship between Orpheus and his extended world, which symbolizes the reflections of Orpheus’ memories of Eurydice, and her catastrophic death. Integrating the “medium” of the Internet to clarify the above-mentioned relationships and extending the borders of the live stage-music represents a notable technological issue in *Orpheus Kristall*, I shall demonstrate. Emphasizing the aesthetic significance of incorporating the digital media in a contemporary art work, Stahnke’s use of Internet as a media in his opera gives also credence to the importance of collective creativity and digital participation.

In this opera, *Kristall* is a metaphor for nature; for Orpheus’ corrupted world. This term is borrowed from the Austrian physicist, Erwin Schrödinger’s concept of “aperiodic crystal” from his influential book *What Is Life?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944). For Stahnke, the complicated, rigorous structure of a crystal is also a metaphor of his intricate, comprehensive microtonal system, comprising fifty-three tones per octave, which employs the partials up to the twenty-first harmonic in the harmonic series. As another allegory to Schrödinger’s concept of “aperiodic Crystals,” Stahnke’s concept of “Difference-tone harmony” (Differenztonharmonik), which is the fundamental of opera’s harmonic structure, is equally significant. Extending the scope of his microtonal intonational system, throughout *Orpheus Kristall*, the composer builds just-tuned chords based on both sorts of the difference-tones, constructing the harmonic structure of the opera.

On the basis of interviews I conducted with Manfred Stahnke in 2011, as well as his own articles, where he explains much about his compositional procedures, I explore the allegorical representation of key contemporary existential issues within *Orpheus Kristall*, made possible through Stahnke’s innovative approaches to digital media and microtonality. Through analysis of its intricate musical structures and technological dimensions, I demonstrate that *Orpheus Kristall* is a successful example of a multimedia art piece that draws upon mythology in order to address complex questions related to cultural and personal identity, while shedding light on the subtle amalgamation of the technology and microtonality. According to Stahnke’s multi-dimensional approach to the art, in *Orpheus Kristall*, he creates a new concept of opera by integrating the following elements: exotic intervallic and harmonic concepts; improvisation; exotic, African percussion instruments; and the Internet; all the while basing this construction on an elaborated version of the Orpheus’ myth, which contains psychological as well as existential connotations. This conventionally mythological, but modernly microtonal and essentially technological opera is a relevant example of a multi-dimensional twenty-first-century art work.