

AUTUMN WINTER

THE OPERA JOURNAL

VOL. 58 2 0 2 5 NO. 2

National Opera Association

THE OPERA JOURNAL (ISSN 3066-7860)

The National Opera Association, 1100 Baits Drive, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2805

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THE OPERA JOURNAL is a free publication to members of the National Opera Association. Information regarding memberships (individuals and organizations) may be found online (www.noa.org/).

LIBRARY SUBSCRIPTION RATE is \$80 per annum. Subscribe online (www.noa.org/) and direct all inquiries to the Executive Director, Kirk Severtson (ksevert@noa.org).

JOURNAL SUBMISSIONS are welcomed on a rolling basis, with calls made each January and June, with respective submission deadlines on April 1 and October 1. Submissions are accepted electronically by the Journal Administrator (operajournal@noa.org). Full submission guidelines may be found online (www.noa.org/research/opera-journal.html/).

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THE OPERA JOURNAL

Autumn/Winter 2025
Vol. 58 | No. 2

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Postdramatic Theatrical Music of Harry Partch and Manfred Stahnke

Navid Bargrivan

Abstract: The stage works of American composer Harry Partch (1901–1974) and German composer Manfred Stahnke (born 1951)—two figures whose art-philosophical ideas and compositional aesthetics correlate—challenge the predominance of the dramatic text and time-based plot in favor of visual, aural, scenic, and corporeal elements. In their pieces, musical and dramaturgical deconstructive emphasis on momentary values, concurrence of signs, and fragmentary structures undermine the dialectical actions within chronological narratives and question the traditional dramatic forms. These elements restructure the hierarchy of the theatrical components governed by the supremacy of the temporally sequential narrative and inform the postdramatic tendencies of Partch’s and Stahnke’s stage works. While music-theatrical conceptions with postdramatic characteristics have flourished after the 1950s, an overarching theoretical concept that would provide a groundwork for analyzing such characteristics has been missing in the scholarly literature. This article borrows the “theory of postdramatic theater,” proposed by the late media, film, and theater scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann (1944–2022), to analyze the shift towards postdrama in Partch’s music-dance theatrical works *Oedipus* (1950) and *The Bewitched* (1955), as well as Stahnke’s chamber operas *Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung* (1982) and *Orpheus Kristall* (2001).

Keywords: Postdramatic theater; corporeality; theatrical music; opera; postdrama

The music dramas of American composer Harry Partch (1901–1974) and the chamber operas of German composer Manfred Stahnke (born 1951)—two figures whose art-philosophical ideas and compositional aesthetics correlate—challenge the predominance of the dramatic text and time-based plot in favor of visual, aural, scenic, and corporeal elements.¹ In their works,

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musical and dramaturgical deconstructive emphasis on momentary values, concurrence of signs, and fragmentary structures undermine the dialectical actions within chronological narratives and question the traditional dramatic forms. These elements often break apart the storytelling drama by focusing on fleeting moments and overlapping symbols, rather than following a clear, linear plot consistently. The dramatic text and time-based plot—the underpinnings of the conventional Western theater—therefore, function as just one layer, one component of the scenic creation, in Partch’s and Stahnke’s compositions.² They rather serve the theatrical process and contribute to the dramaturgy instead of exerting authority and domination. By defying how stories are usually told in theatrical music, such constellations invite audiences to experience performance in new, unsettling ways, raising questions about deriving and grasping meaning. The restructured hierarchy of dramaturgical and sonic components in Partch’s and Stahnke’s stage works, thus, informs their *postdramatic* tendencies.

While music-theatrical works with postdramatic characteristics have flourished after the 1950s, an overarching theoretical concept that would provide a groundwork for analyzing such features has been missing in the scholarly literature. This article borrows the “theory of postdramatic theater,” proposed by the late media, film, and theater scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann (1944–2022), to examine innovative elements in Partch’s music dramas *Oedipus* (1950) and *The Bewitched* (1955), as well as Stahnke’s chamber operas *Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung* (1982) and *Orpheus Kristall* (2001). These works serve as case studies that exemplify postdramatic principles. The theory of postdramatic theater lends itself to examining the facets of Partch’s and Stahnke’s music-

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1 Stahnke began experimenting with tuning and intonation as a young composer, but it was not until he joined György Ligeti’s composition class at the Hamburg University for Music and Drama in 1973 that he learned about Partch. During his two years of residency at Stanford University, Ligeti (1923–2006) had visited Partch in early 1970s, then, introduced his unique achievements to his pupils in Hamburg, which triggered a life-long fascination for Stahnke. To study at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign with Partch’s friend, supporter, and briefly apprentice, composer Ben Johnston (1926–2019), Stahnke travelled to the United States in 1979. He has studied, experimented with, and written about Partch’s legacy of just intonation (natural tuning) in several of his compositions and publications, hence, Partch’s acoustical and philosophical perspectives have become crucial to the development of Stahnke’s approach. As a professor in Hamburg (1983–2017), Stahnke also transferred his passion for Partch’s theories to his own students. See Stahnke’s publications, for instance, “Gedanken zu Harry Partch,” “Zwei Blumen der reinen Stimmung,” “Harry Partch – ein kleines Tutorium,” and “Partchenogenese.”

2 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 17. In this article, I cite the English translation of Lehmann’s book by Karen Jürs-Munby (2006). Lehmann’s book was initially published in German in 1999, see the Works Cited section.

dramatic stage works that defy the preeminence of the time-based storylines. By moving away from commanding, traditional narrative structures, their works challenge us to engage with music and drama in new ways—focusing on atmosphere, gesture, and soundscapes rather than mere plot progression.

For the first time in the scholarly literature, this article demonstrates that, although some aspects of these selected pieces remain faithful to the traditional dramatic plot, text-oriented precepts, and operatic conventions, other significant aspects demonstrate shifts towards postdrama. The following section addresses the emergence of the theory of postdramatic theater and related analytical frameworks—such as the concept of postopera—propagated by theater and theatrical music scholars and practitioners during the last two centuries. It reviews, contrasts, and draw connections between such arguments to set the stage for analyzing Partch’s and Stahnke’s compositions in the proceeding sections.

Postdrama in Theater and Theatrical Music

Before Lehmann introduced and systematically molded his theory, other authors such as Richard Schechner had used the term in different contexts.³ However, as Remshardt and Mancewicz explain, “Lehmann’s *Postdramatic Theatre* . . . was fundamental in terms of framing the debate about contemporary theatre experimentation.”⁴ Whether they directly refer to Lehmann’s work or not, several authors have developed frameworks for the analysis of the modern theater and theatrical music related to this theory. Nicholas Till, for instance, proposes the concept of “post-operatic” productions to develop a critical practice of opera that articulates lyricism, spectacle, and ritual. As Till also points out, Joseph Kerman, in his seminal book *Opera as Drama*, finds precisely these elements as unessential to opera.⁵ Post-operatic productions, nevertheless, aim to refigure the components of, among others, space, body, visuality, technology, language, and form.⁶

In the realm of theater and performance, Marvin Carlson begins exactly with Lehmann’s theory to analyze works of several, recent, international directors that he frames as “postdramatic performances.”⁷ Similarly, the edited volume *Postdramatic Theatre and Form* builds on Lehmann’s concept to provide insights into influential figures, movements, and styles within contemporary theater and performance.⁸ Applying this theory to theatrical music, Demetris Zavros’s dissertation examines the “music-centric conceptualization of myth” in theater, while Jelena Novak proposes the concept of “postopera” to explore the relationship

3 See Cole, *Postdramatic Tragedies*, 1-2.

4 Remshardt and Mancewicz, *The Routledge Companion*, 5.

5 Kerman, *Opera as Drama*.

6 Till, “I don’t mind if something is operatic.”

7 Carlson, “Postdramatic Theatre and Postdramatic Performance.”

8 Boyle, et al., eds., *Postdramatic Theatre and Form*.

between voice and body in some modern operatic projects as case studies.⁹ While she explicitly gives credence to Lehmann's theory and justifies its relevance for her analysis, she coins the term "postopera" to address postdramatic constructions as Lehmann's work demonstrates.¹⁰ Finally, as Yuval Sharon denounces the deep-rooted elitist and obsolete aspects of the conventional theatrical music, he envisions a future opera not only sustainable, inclusive and imaginative, but also as bold as non-narrative works: "Lehmann called this kind of piece *post-dramatic theater*—that is, theater in which atmosphere and composition replace the structure of a narrative, giving shape and meaning to a new kind of theatrical experience."¹¹ The breadth of these discourses reveals the significance that the theory of postdramatic theater has gained over the last three decades. Considering this significance, the article in hand analyzes innovative features of Partch's and Stahnke's works in light of Lehmann's theory.

Postdramatic theatrical music dissolves the authority of the time-based narrative, dramatic actions of the characters, and the story. Instead, it advantages scenically dynamic formations, maximum isolation of objects, quasi-ritual states, corporeality, simultaneous realities, and non-hierarchical use of signs—elements that Lehmann addresses throughout his book. This shift redefines the essence of theatricality—not as a vehicle for storytelling, but as a space for sensory, symbolic, and embodied experiences that resist easy interpretation. Instead of telling a clear story with characters and plot, postdramatic theatrical music focuses on imagery, physical presence, and layered meanings. It invites the viewer to experience the performance more as a ritual or collage than as a traditional drama.

As Lehmann explains, certain modern theatrical works within the last one-hundred years—for example, those by Samuel Beckett, Heiner Müller, and Robert Wilson—discount the dramatic-narrative mode. They eschew the two foundational but contrasting approaches to theater: representational imitation of reality, as formulated by Aristotle, and the epic-narrative mode of narration, as practiced by Bertolt Brecht.¹² Aristotle's idea of theater evokes a realistic world that draws the theatergoers in, while Brecht's style tells stories in a manner that reminds the spectators they are watching a drama, encouraging them to think more critically about what they are observing. Both Partch's *The Bewitched* and Stahnke's *Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung* manifest deviations from both Aristotelian and Brechtian paradigms, adhering to a postdramatic aesthetic. Partch's *Oedipus* and Stahnke's *Orpheus Kristall*, however, largely abide by the dramatic-narrative mode,

9 Zavros, "Music-Theatre and Music"; Novak, *Postopera*.

10 See also Novak, "Singing Corporeality." Novak examines particular "postoperas" that challenge the conventional notions of the singing body and voice: *La Belle et la Bête* (Philip Glass), *Writing to Vermeer* (Louis Andriessen, Peter Greenaway), *Three Tales* (Steve Reich, Beryl Korot), *One* (Michel van der Aa), *Homeland* (Laurie Anderson), and *La Commedia* (Louis Andriessen, Hal Hartley).

11 Sharon, *A New Philosophy of Opera*, 94.

12 See Aristotle, *Poetics*; Brecht, *Brecht on Theater*.

although their other features exhibit convincing postdramatic traits—features such as voice, ritualization, and superimposition of multiple sonic trajectories.

Despite their disparities, such postdramatic works no longer emphasize the dramatic text as the principal medium. They revoke the role of the dramatic text as traditionally the central element of conventional theater that sets the stage for thematization and reflexivity.¹³ Akin to other modern and postmodern art forms, experimental theatrical music often inclines toward introspective thematic self-examination. Since language has functioned as the primary medium that enables the playful, self-referential use of signs, introspective thematic self-examination might refer to the textual dimension. However, in the experimental theatrical music, the same dynamics and disruptions that affect visual, auditory, gestural, and spatial elements of performance also influence the text.

Lehmann combines historical survey and analysis of drama theory to articulate the renunciation of the traditional theatrical text, examining a wide range of discourses, including those by Aristotle, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Walter Benjamin, Antonin Artaud, Theodor W. Adorno, and Brecht, as well as Roland Barthes, Peter Szondi, Jean-François Lyotard, and Richard Schechner. These figures, among many others, contributed to the discourse surrounding conventional drama theory, offering ways to expand, or revise, it.¹⁴ Artaud, for instance, envisioned a visceral, radical, and metamorphic modern theater in his concept of “theater of cruelty,” which by no means meant a violent theater, but an unrelenting theatrical confrontation with reality that bypasses the rationality and reaches the subconscious.¹⁵ Just like Lehmann’s theory, which he formulated based on his analysis of certain theatrical traditions, Artaud’s theory—as a cogent precursor to Lehmann’s—evolved from his theatrical experience and practice with, among others, the Surrealist movement and Theatre Alfred Jarry.

Barthes, on the other hand, posited the physicality, presence, and texture of voice as influential in theater beyond its linguistic meaning—the physical, tactile quality of the voice that conveys something raw and intimate. He framed the voice not just as a medium for delivering words or melodies, but a bodily experience that encourages listeners to value expressiveness and vulnerability over technical perfection and semantics.¹⁶ As we shall see, this notion will become essential to examine Partch’s and Stahnke’s unconventional vocal lines.

Lehmann, notwithstanding, mainly reassesses Szondi’s Hegelian theory of drama as a historical dialectic of form and content, where Szondi considers Brecht’s “epic theatre of the scientific age” as the decisive break with the traditional

13 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 69.

14 See, for example, Schechner, *Performance Theory*; Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*; Žižek and Dolan, *Opera’s Second Death*; Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*; and Rissi, *Opera in Performance*.

15 Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*.

16 Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*.

Aristotelian drama.¹⁷ This crucial reassessment reframes how we understand the evolution of modern theater—not as a smooth progression, but as a rupture that redefines the relationship between performance, crowd, and meaning. Partch intended to split from all common flavors of Western theatrical music, bringing it back to its ritual, corporeal bedrock. Therefore, examining his musico-dramatic concept in terms of Lehmann’s reassessment of Szondi’s argument illuminates noteworthy corners of Partch’s architecture. Although Stahnke did not aim to break away from the concept of opera, his music-theatrical innovations also beg a critical assessment beyond the still-narrative-driven Brechtian formula.

While confronting the notion of Brecht—the self-named “Einstein of the new dramatic form”—as the sole pinnacle of the modern theater, Lehmann views Brecht’s innovative concepts merely as a part of the dramatic tradition. He maintains that Szondi’s Hegelian time-bound concept ignores all theatrical developments beyond the Aristotelian-Brechtian dialectic, beyond the construction of a sealed fictional universe and the representational enactment of a narrative structure. This approach provides new possibilities for performances that prioritize presence, sensation, and symbolic resonance over traditional storytelling. It provokes us to engage with theater not as a window into another world, but as an active, interpretive experience in the here and now. Instead of creating a make-believe world with an unequivocal story, this kind of performance focuses on the live moment—what the viewers see, hear, and perceive—inviting them to construct intent and connotation in the experience itself.

Brecht rather *facilitated* a transition from the older form of dramatic toward postdramatic theater. Postdramatic theatrical music would not necessarily adhere to the penchant of the Brechtian theatrical model for ideological and political rigidity, as well as its focus on rationality and definitive authority. It, nonetheless, builds upon Brechtian foundations, emerging from the space Brecht provided through his exploration of how representation becomes self-aware and how theatergoers engage with performance—his concept of *Zuschaukunst* (the art of spectating).¹⁸ This concept shifts the focus from what is performed on stage to how the viewer experiences and interprets it, emphasizing the spectator’s active role in deriving meaning rather than passively receiving a story. Instead of just watching a story unfold, the spectator becomes part of the performance by thinking, feeling, and making their own sense of what they see.

As convincing cases of the post-Brechtian, postdramatic theater, Lehmann, then, examines trends such as the absurdist theater, theater of scenography, *Sprechstück*, visual dramaturgy, theater of situation, and the Concrete Theater.¹⁹

17 See Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas*. According to Lehmann, “Brecht chose the term ‘dramatic theatre’ to designate the tradition that his epic ‘theatre of the scientific age’ intended to put an end to.” Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 17.

18 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 33.

19 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 30.

Each of these styles represent alternative approaches to performance beyond traditional storytelling. They challenge the idea that theater must follow an incontestable plot, or character development, instead articulating visual design, spatial relationships, language as sound, and the spectators' immediate experience. These types of theater do not focus on telling a straightforward story. Instead, they use tools such as striking visuals, unusual speech, or abstract situations to make the attendees reckon and contemplate afresh. Such characteristics appear not only in postdramatic theater, but also theatrical music.

Experimental new operatic productions and reconceptualized traditional operas, for instance, those under Wilson's and Sharon's directorial supervision, often encapsulate cutting-edge scenic and visual conceptions. They integrate modern technologies and question traditional dramatic forms, a practice that extends back to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or even to Florentine Camerata's early operas.²⁰ These touchpoints for understanding music, drama, and visual elements inform the historical pursuit of total music-theatrical experience. Referencing these moments highlights how contemporary experimental works are not abandoning tradition but reimagining it—pushing the boundaries of what opera and music theater can morph to.

Postdramatic theatrical music emerges from a web of intertextual and inter-performative relationships. Rather than developing in isolation, these artistic forms evolve from established conventions and historical precedents. While this continuity is inherent, the ways in which postdramatic works reference earlier traditions—whether subtly or overtly—can vary significantly in degree, intention, and stylistic execution. Despite the dominance of narrative-driven plots and lifelike characters in conventional (music-)theater, traces of postdramatic aesthetics are not entirely absent from older traditions. Elements such as fragmented storytelling, stylistic heterogeneity, and exaggerated or hypernaturalistic gestures—often grotesque or neo-expressionist—can be found in earlier works, suggesting a porous boundary between dramatic and postdramatic modes.²¹

These stylistic features challenge audiences to engage with works that resist straightforward interpretation. Rather than conveying a clear message, such pieces provoke reflection through emotional intensity, visual excess, and structural disjunction. They invite us to interpret rather than consume, to experience rather than decode. Crucially, it is the specific configuration of these elements that determines their aesthetic categorization. A work may lean toward either dramatic or postdramatic sensibilities, but this does not imply a strict dichotomy.²² The presence of one does not negate the other. In fact, many

20 See Wilson, "Past Productions;" and Sharon, "Work." Wilson's collaboration with Philip Glass to create *Einstein on the Beach* in 1975 informs a significant postdramatic opera, see Novak and Richardson, *Einstein on the Beach*.

21 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 24–25.

22 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 24–25.

contemporary works embody a hybrid aesthetic, where dramatic and postdramatic components coexist and interact. The following sections will explore concrete examples of this hybridization, illustrating how the fusion of these modes can form a cohesive artistic vision.

Partch's and Stahnke's postdramatic works encompass the revival, persistence, or continued evolution of earlier aesthetic traditions, including those that, whether in textual or performative dimensions, historically diverged from the music-dramatic paradigm. They do not represent categorical instances of postdramatic theatrical music. Instead, they embrace an interplay of the dramatic and postdramatic components interwoven in their multimedia formations. They integrate sound, image, text, movement, and technologies that generate layered experiences and hybrid forms to break the boundaries of genre and medium toward sensory and interpretive events rather than a linear narrative. As Lehmann states while reiterating the dependency of the new paradigm on the older pillars:

The adjective "postdramatic" denotes a theatre that feels bound to operate beyond drama, at a time "after" the authority of the dramatic paradigm in theatre. What it does not mean is an abstract negation and mere looking away from the tradition of drama. "After" drama means that it lives on as a structure—however weakened and exhausted—of the "normal" theatre: as an expectation of large parts of its audience, as a foundation for many of its means of representation, as a quasi-automatically working norm of its dramaturgy.²³

Partch and Stahnke, nevertheless, sought to incorporate unconventional artistic procedures to recast the common music-theatrical patterns, as the following sections demonstrate.

Corporeality and Criticism of the Contemporary Culture in Harry Partch's Oedipus and The Bewitched

In the program of the 1961 New York performance of Partch's *Oedipus*, historian and music critic Jacques Barzun commends Partch, stating, "I have long been convinced that you are making the most original and powerful contribution to dramatic music on this continent."²⁴ If we take Barzun at his words, what aspects of Partch's theatrical music demonstrate originality, beyond his innovative intonational system of up to forty-three tone to octave and self-made, remarkable music instruments? How do such original aspects deviate from the conventional music-dramatic paradigms? The answer lies within Partch's rebellion against the predominant theatrical music tradition; he intended to reform music drama, injecting it with corporeal and ritual gusto, extracted from pre-Christian traditions such as ancient Greek and non-Western rituals.

23 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 27.

24 Partch, *Oedipus*, Music and Performing Arts Library Harry Partch Collection, 1914–2007.

With its focus on corporeality and ritualization, the theory of postdramatic theater supplies a meaningful analytical schema for dissecting the unconventional elements in Partch's "theater of states."²⁵ The defining principle of Partch's theatrical music no longer rests only upon progression of action, but rather upon highlighting the "states": static, or dynamic, constellations of atmosphere, affect, and presence, resisting outright temporal linearity and narrative causality. These constellations—whether stable or in flux—resist being subsumed into linear temporality, or typical narrative logic. Rather than progressing through a sequence of events with unambiguous cause-and-effect structure, they operate through a spatial or experiential coherence, privileging mood, intensity, and relationality over plot, or chronology.

While in the traditional theatrical music the physical body functions as a legible system of signs, with its gestural vocabulary interpretable as textual codes, in Partch's postdramatic theatrical music the body emerges as an autonomous whole. The physical body functions as a language according to Partch's vision; its movements and gestures act like words, or symbols, that others can read and interpret, almost like reading a text. The body becomes a constant and self-directed presence—something always present that operates on its own terms, not just as a tool, or symbol. Instead of conveying discrete emotions through representation, it transforms into a performative site, exhibiting inscription of collective histories and their embodiment through its immediacy, materiality, and corporeality.

In postdrama, the dramatic ideal—saturated by the dialectic tensions interwoven in the plot—succumbs to a corporeal narrative, conceiving the onstage actuality and equal prominence of all artistic media, the underpinning of Partch's aesthetic of corporeality.²⁶ Partch's concept of corporeality shapes the integration and live presence of diverse artistic elements on stage. This includes the embodied participation of versatile performers—who act as musicians, dancers, and actors—the sculptural incorporation of his distinctive and visually striking musical instruments into the set design, and the cohesive interplay of sound, body movement, lighting, costumes, dramaturgy, and textual components.

For Partch, the specialization inherent in concert music and dramatic theater meant "purism," or music for the sake of music and theater for the sake of theater, drained from an integrated human experience. He disapproved of Broadway musicals too; although they might typify a bond between music and theater, as Partch argued, they just illustrate plain musicalization of dramatic text accompanied by incidental music, while exalting the entertainment culture. Partch also dismissed conventional operas. He revered an integrated artistic experience, yet he even objected to the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a total artwork

25 Within the framework of his theory, Lehmann uses the term "theater of states" to refer to a work that rejects the absolute supremacy of dramatic actions embedded in temporally structured plots, see Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 68–69.

26 See Partch, *Genesis of Music*; Johnston, "The Corporealism of Harry Partch."

where all artistic media, including music, unify to illuminate the philosophical implications of the dramatic narrative. However, Wagner's concept, with the symphony orchestra banished to the pit and detached from the actual onstage actions, seemed detrimental to Partch's intended corporeal-ritual theatrical music. It would defy Partch's notion of the theater stage as a hypermedium, a stage for integration of all artistic media, even the music instruments contributing to décor.²⁷ He, therefore, realized his own utopian, corporeal-ritual total artwork that realizes postdramatic structures in music dramas such as *Oedipus* and *The Bewitched*.²⁸

Partch's long-lasting fascination with the story of *Oedipus*, the king of Thebes in Greek mythology, led to the first version of his approximately eighty-minute music drama in eighteenth sections (1951), premiered shortly thereafter. He revised some roles—a total of ten characters—and instrumentations in *Oedipus*'s second and third versions that appeared in 1954 and 1967 (Table 1). In terms of the instruments, Partch uses a combination of his novel, sculpturally and sonically alluring music instruments—such as Cloud Chamber Bowls and Gourd Tree—as well as adapted violas, double basses, and guitars with the capability to realize various micro-intervals stemming from the spectrum of partials. This unique instrumentation and the function of the instruments as significant ingredients of set design, in fact, enriches the corporeality, in turn, the postdramatic aura, of Partch's *Oedipus*.

Scene	Title
1	Introduction
2	Opening Scene
3	First Chorus
4	Tiresias Scene
5	Second Chorus
6	Creon Scene
7	Jocasta Scene
8	Incidental Music
9	Third Chorus
10	Messenger Scene
11	Fourth Chorus
12	Herdsman Scene
13	Oedipus Scene
14	Fifth Chorus
15	Instrumental Commentary
16	Antiphony
17	Exit Oedipus: Dance-Pantomime
18	Final Chorus
	Coda

Table 1—List of characters and scenes in Harry Partch's *Oedipus*. Partch, "Oedipus-Dance Drama," 267-303.

²⁷ See Havelková, *Opera as Hypermedium*.

²⁸ *Oedipus* was premiered at Mills College in 1952 and *The Bewitched* at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in 1957.

The constituents of Partch's corporeal theatrical music—including the ritual configurations, the equality of various artistic media, and the actuality of the instruments and performers on the stage—inform *Oedipus's* postdramatic nature; actuality refers to the physical presence of the multitasking performers—their bodies and instruments—on stage, emphasizing their immediate and active role in shaping the audience's experience. This presence functions not merely as a symbol, a utility, or a decoration, but contributes integrally and perceptibly to the performance itself. The plot-based W. B. Yeats's version of Sophocles' play that Partch adopts, however, somewhat defies its postdramatic formation. In *Oedipus*, the visual, audible, scenic, and ritual aspects remain subordinated to the primacy of text, a time-based narrative, and the dialogues of the characters.

Despite its text-oriented surface, ancient Greek mythological literature and its archetypal characters—as well as their actions that contain philosophical implications to real human experience—captivated Partch, as much as the Greek music theory, music instruments, tone declamations, and ritualistic music-theatrical performances. While underlining that he did not mean to imitate the Greek concepts, Partch describes his realization of *Oedipus* and asserts its postdramatic aspects, stating:

The work is presented as a human value, necessarily pinned to a time and place, necessarily involving the oracular gods and Greek proper and place-names, but nevertheless, not necessarily Greek. . . . Yet, from the standpoint of dramatic technique, it is a historical fact that the Greeks used some kind of "tone declamation" in their dramatic works, and that it was common practice among them to present language, music, and dance as a dramatic unity. In this conception of *King Oedipus*, I am striving such a synthesis, not because it might lead me to the "Greek spirit," but because I believe in it.²⁹

In *Oedipus*, the tone declamations—the dialogical exchanges of the characters—function barely as discussions, rather as, in Lehmann's words, "a competition of speech (*Wettreden*)."³⁰

These tone declamations manifest a ritualistic battle of words, a poetic stage- and performance-text, as opposed to conversations as a defining factor of the dramatic text. While most modern operas display dialogic exchange and discursive negotiation, the dialogue of ancient tragedy—despite its outward semblance of rhetorical confrontation—does not function as genuine discussion. Rather, each character remains enclosed within their own ontological and ideological sphere, rendering the verbal interaction a form of parallel monologue. The tragic dialogue operates less as a site of dialectical conflict, instead, more as a performative *Wettreden*.

29 Partch, "King Oedipus," 214.

30 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 75.

Although Partch's *Oedipus* adheres to Sophocles's plot, he grants a postdramatic quality to this work and enhances its quasi-ritualistic corporeality by means of tone-declamation based on his peculiar "speech-music" style. The voices in Partch's speech music closely follow the natural inflections of human speech aloof from conventional, musicalized operatic singing. He, in fact, devised his notorious microtonal scale of up to forty-three tones to octave to be able to capture as many pitch intonations of human voice as possible. This postdramatic makeup of *Oedipus* also dominates Partch's dance satire *The Bewitched*.³¹

Illustrating his conceptual shift from *Oedipus*—still governed by dialogues and conventional plot—to *The Bewitched*, a corporeal dance satire that contains almost no dialogues and time-based narrative, Partch writes:

In my version of Sophocles' Oedipus the King, I tried to rediscover some of the stature that the Western theater has lost in its long divorce from integrated music. More recently, in *The Bewitched*, I ventured into satire, in the feeling that a people dedicated to satirical scholarship and cause-and-effect rationality is hopeless only when it ceases to be able to laugh at itself intelligently. . . . Satire . . . imbue[s] the listener and the viewer with a shaft of momentary recognition and delight. It can bring reevaluation and self-perception . . .³²

In *The Bewitched*—an iconoclastic story of the interaction of a witch, witch's orchestral chorus, and *the bewitched* dancers—Partch's venture into satire exhibits the postdramatic "theater of states," where dynamic onstage formations and corporeal structures dilute the dramatic plot. In this "Latter-Day Ritual Designed to De-fertilize the Machine Age for a Period of Seventy-Five Minutes," Partch composed scenes of metaphorical witchery to release the "Lost Musicians," represented by the dancers, from their mental prejudices.³³ Instead of a time-based narrative, in each scene a different ritualistic dance predominates, which, while remaining compatible with the modern world, transfers magical and mystical ritual into a fantastical, bygone society.

The Bewitched embodies the fusion of naively and irreverently enacted magical ceremonies, inter-formative contexts, and the evocation of presence—all revealing frameworks for understanding postdramatic theatrical music. The convergence of these elements serves as a foundation for Partch's development of a postdramatic approach to theatrical music. This synthesis elucidates postdrama's emphasis on immediacy, its inclination to corporeality, and its alignment with ritual practices found across diverse traditions. Partch, thus, reconciles a phantasmagorical world of witchery with ritualistic dances borrowed from different cultures. He

31 *Oedipus*'s score is available via Schott Music: <https://www.schott-music.com/en/>. One recording is available via Innova Recordings: <https://innova.mu/>. Other complete, or partial, performances are also available on YouTube.

32 Partch, "The Ancient Magic," 186–187.

33 Partch, "Some New and Old Thoughts," 231.

constructs a scenically dynamic stage set, embellished by his instruments that serve also as decorative sculptures; the character of the Witch; the instrumentalists, who represent the Witch's chorus; and the dancers. The corporeal amalgamation of these elements proclaims *The Bewitched's* postdramatic structure.

As in Partch's *The Bewitched*, ceremonial dramaturgies feature certain earlier-twentieth-century, modernist literature and theater. For instance, as Lehmann points out, Stéphane Mallarmé had already envisaged a theater grounded in ceremonial forms, while T.S. Eliot famously acknowledged his sense of aesthetic fulfillment in the solemnity of a well-executed High Mass.³⁴ They also extolled the integrated physicality of performance, dance, costume, and music typical of ancient rituals—an essential component of Partch's concept of corporeality that neglects the supremacy of the dramatic text, functioning as an impulse for his desire to revive and reinterpret such ur-dramas.

Partch intended to (re)create a kind of an "ur"-drama, which, ironically, granted a "post"-dramatic flair to his works. Although notions such as "primitive theater" or "ur-drama" remain to some degree speculative and subject to reconstruction, anthropological and ethnological consensus suggests that early theatrical forms, even prior to the development of writing, emerged as deeply affective and symbolically rich ritualistic practices, often centered on vital, communal concerns such as hunting and fertility. They, then, evolved through mimetic expression to a type of dance performance that integrated masks, costumes, and props, while combining elements of music and role-play to create structures of behaviors and immersive ceremonies.³⁵

The Bewitched draws on a constellation of audiovisual, tactile, and symbolic elements rooted in ancient rituals, shaping its corporeal dimension. Embodied semiotics unfold through gesture and movement, conveying meaning beyond choreography and invoking ritualistic resonance. Temporal and rhythmic intricacies drive musical processes, guiding perception and shaping experiential time. Language transforms into sonic material, forming a compositional soundscape that dissolves boundaries between speech and music. Visual components activate affective responses, engaging the senses without relying on representational function. Immediate performative energy in this work intensifies the experience, anchoring the event in the present moment. Rather than functioning independently, these components interact within a dynamic structure that transcends conventional dramatic narrative. Their convergence establishes a postdramatic framework where embodiment, sonic texture, and visual affect override linear storytelling. *The Bewitched* unfolds as a ritualistic and sensorial event, foregrounding presence, process, and transformation.

The aesthetic of corporeality that Partch appropriated affirms the postdramatic tendencies of his music dramas—not only through the inherent meaning of corporeality, which emphasizes the actuality and physicality of the performing body,

34 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 70.

35 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 46–47.

but also through Partch’s deliberate and expanded engagement with this concept as a compositional and theatrical principle. Partch’s notion of corporeality, hence, informs the onstage presence and fusion of all artistic media, including the body and mind of multifaceted performers as musicians, dancers, and actors; the sculptural integration of his unique, visually compelling music instruments as elements of set-design; as well as the lighting, costumes, dramaturgy, and the text. The highly stylized ceremonial procedures of dance, chorus, and music that dominate *The Bewitched* resonate with Partch’s notion of corporeality. He examined non-Western practices to infuse the Western theatrical music with corporeal flavors borrowed from these cultures, hoping that the satirical corporeality of *The Bewitched* would intone the existential issues implied in his stage-text.

Partch’s novel, largely microtonal, and sculpturally pleasing music instruments function as an essential part of the stage décor of *The Bewitched* too.³⁶ These include instruments such as Surrogate Kithara and Marimba Eroica, joined by cello, piccolo, and clarinets. To accompany the Witch’s voice and chorus with their predominantly percussive character, Partch fully integrates the instruments in the psychological storyline—his cultural criticism: “Stories of release through salutary and whimsical witchery; from prejudice; from individual limitations; even from the accidents of physical form; of sex that create mental obstacle to vision.”³⁷ He bases the purely instrumental dance scenes—occasionally accompanied by Witch’s voice—on his impression of non-Western dance and theater cultures in the disguise of a fictional story (Table 2). Therefore, the corporeal integration of the character of Witch, *the bewitched* dancers, the Witch’s orchestral chorus, and Partch’s instruments and instrumental music reminiscent of African and South-East-Asian musical cultures construct the postdramatic foundation of the work.

Scene	Title
	<i>The Witch</i> [in all scenes]: Kabuki—slow, dignified movements with rigid trunk, and occasional quick, furious movements.
1	Imitations of the Cantonese music hall
2	Eighteenth-century formality, with satiric twentieth-century expressionism, in part
3	East Indian, with—I hope—some tumbling
4	A formal solo, with modern dance farce at the end
5	Slightly satiric expressionism at first
6	Satiric ballet, almost throughout
7	Modern-dance comedy throughout
8	Kabuki throughout
9	Near East throughout
10	Open

Table 2—List of dance types in Harry Partch’s *The Bewitched*. Partch, “The Bewitched—A Dance Satire,” 309.

36 See Corey, “Harry Partch - His Instruments.”

37 Partch, “The Bewitched—A Dance Satire,” 307.

Partch's approach to the element of voice—which drifts from the dialogical structure of his previous works—also informs *The Bewitched's* postdramatic quality. The Witch does not sing any words, instead, engages with the materiality of voice itself and solely intones specific sounds from the throat to reinforce the mood of the scene and to evoke the ritual dances. This challenge to the referential and symbolic purpose of vocalization presents an arrangement of tones, words, sentences, and sounds that are governed less by semantic coherence and more by the logic of scenic composition. It favors a dramaturgy driven by imagery over one centered on textual denotation and connotation, as well as a linguistic re-articulation of factual content.³⁸

Pointing to this peculiar method of incorporating voice within a scenic-oriented stagecraft, Lehmann's explanation justifies Partch's postdramatic approach to the component of voice in *The Bewitched*:

The *principle of exposition* applied to body, gesture and voice also seizes the language material and attacks language's function of representation. Instead of a linguistic re-presentation of facts, there is a "position" of tones, words, sentences, sounds that are hardly controlled by a "meaning" but instead by the scenic composition, by a visual, not text-oriented dramaturgy.³⁹

Partch's "principle of exposition" centralizes an asemantic position of tones, words, sentences, and sounds. Within *The Bewitched's* postdramatic dramaturgy, Partch ceases to employ language as representative of dramatic action. The piece, hence, does not contain any meaningful sentences and dialogues.

In Partch's stage-text, through allegorical witchery, an oracle exhorts youngsters to dance in non-Western styles to undo their biases shaped by the machine-age technologies and entertainment industry. Partch sought to revive the corporeal essence of ritualistic performance traditions, particularly their holistic integration of media such as dance and music—elements that had largely disappeared from conventional Western theatrical music. He recognized that, during its transformative emergence, the Japanese theater, for instance, encompassed a wide array of popular performance arts, including juggling and acrobatics, exemplifying a holistic artistic expression. In contrast, while contemporary practices may integrate music with drama and dance, the prevailing aesthetic ideal emphasizes a commitment to artistic "purity," specialization of the artists and separation of different artistic media despite them co-functioning, which Partch dismissed.⁴⁰

38 *The Bewitched's* score is available via Schott Music: <https://www.schott-music.com/en/>. One recording is available via Neuma Records: <https://neumarecords.org/>. Other complete, or partial, performances are also available on YouTube.

39 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 146.

40 Partch, "Some New and Old Thoughts," 236.

The Bewitched relies on primordial rituals to address contemporary cultural issues and settled in a dichotomous world. The narrative oscillates continuously between a mythic antiquity—situated in the millennia surrounding the dawn of recorded history—and the contemporary American moment, characterized by the everyday experiences of university students, sport teams, youthful romances, criminal investigations, and political activity, as if the centuries that separated these eras had been entirely effaced.⁴¹ Among these components, Partch elevates one group: the “Lost Musicians,” who, through ritualistic dancing in satirical situations, evoked by the Witch and accompanied by Witch’s orchestra, come to perceive their musical disorientation in the age of an increasing bond between art and technology. By using dance rituals drained of a fundamental dramatic narrative, *The Bewitched* post-dramatically tackles the contemporaneous cultural discourse on modern technologies, as well as the dichotomy of entertainment and art music.

Portraying the real-life events that prompted the notion of the “bewitched lost musicians,” Partch recounts his encounter with aspiring artists who visited him in California:

. . . I would say that easily 90 percent of them fell into a certain category. They grew up, musically, in dance bands, became bored and dissatisfied, and went to music schools looking for different and broader perspectives. Here they found what they wanted, for a time, but eventually realized that their music professors, generally speaking, simply marked certain areas *terra incognita* like the ancient geographers—and the less said about them the better because they weren’t worth exploring. These musicians did not feel really at home in either musical world, either the serious or not-so-serious. In my studio they generally played music I had written, although now and then they had jam sessions, . . . but they occasionally achieved a kind of magic perception through their music. Thus was created the Chorus of Lost Musicians, which is the basis for the dance-satire *The Bewitched*.⁴²

This story reveals the temporally non-chronological, dual roots of *The Bewitched*, with one foot in the contemporary world, the other in ancient rituals, for instance, in India and Japan.

While addressing the preeminence of the corporeal elements in the postdramatic theater, Lehmann hints at the Indian theatrical dance Kathakali and the classical Japanese Noh theater as two traditions that embrace ritual corporeality. Indian Kathakali and Japanese Noh theater act according to fundamentally different precepts, centering on dance, choral elements, and music, characterized by stylized ritualistic forms, narrative structures, and lyrical texts. European theatrical music, however, has traditionally focused on the

41 Partch, “A Soul Tormented,” 242.

42 Partch, “A Soul Tormented,” 243.

mimetic enactment of speech and action, aiming to render events and characters present on stage through dramatic representation, in Lehmann's words—"Vergegenwärtigung" (making present, realization, visualization).⁴³

Influenced by such traditions, Partch borrowed non-Western practices to infuse the Western theatrical music with strong corporeal zest. He, subsequently, invoked in his monumental final work *Delusion of the Fury*—which, among others, builds on Noh theater—a path toward recasting the conventional, Euro-American theatrical music. Partch's theories and practice have become for Stahnke a constantly present source of inspiration and exploration.⁴⁴ Like Partch, Stahnke incorporated postdramatic elements in his stage works too, although in his own distinct manner. Lehmann's theory, hence, aids the analysis of such elements also in Stahnke's music-theatrical works that rearrange the conventional, temporarily sequential dramatic narrative.

Narrative and Mise-en-scène in Manfred Stahnke's Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung and Orpheus Kristall

Manfred Stahnke's chamber operas epitomize significant features of postdrama. In *Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung* (1982), Stahnke's collage of Edgar Allan Poe's selected poems dismisses the time-based dramatic narrative, inclining to postdramatic paradigm.⁴⁵ It articulates the psychological challenges of its sole character, reflecting on the dichotomous notions of beauty and terror intrinsic to human life. Stahnke, first approached Poe's texts through Charles Baudelaire's mid-nineteenth-century translations of Poe's writings from English to French—Baudelaire, himself an early influence on Symbolism, admired Poe's detailed, figurative imagery.⁴⁶ Poe's and Baudelaire's (proto)symbolist language indeed influenced Stahnke's postdramatic theatrical poetry in *Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung*, revoking the chronological dramatic plot.

Stahnke crafts a stage-poetry in *Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung* that, akin to the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Symbolist literature, dislodges the story-telling drama. As Lehmann points out, Symbolist dramas at the turn of the twentieth century created a new "poetry of theatre."⁴⁷ Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1898) based on Maurice Maeterlinck's eponymous Symbolist play (1893) exemplifies such a music theatrical piece, where, according to Sharon, the frequent realistic interpretations of the plot

43 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 21.

44 See Footnote 1.

45 Stahnke's *Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung* based on poems by Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) was staged in Braunschweig and Gelsenkirchen in 1983, as well as Berlin in 2012. The libretto of the opera contains Stahnke's own translations of Poe's poetry from English to German.

46 From 1852 to 1865, Baudelaire (1821–1867) published several translations of Poe's writings. See, for instance, Poe, *Writings by Poe, Translations by Baudelaire*.

47 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 59.

in some productions contradicts its stage-poetry.⁴⁸ In pursuit of a renewed theatrical poetics, Stahnke abandons the foundational conventions of dramatic plot and narrative structure, as it emerged prominently when the lyrical and Symbolist drama of the fin de siècle transitioned from the margins to the central position in historical discourse. Furthermore, we can interpret even the title of the opera that translates to “Madness that is the Soul of the Plot” as a reference to postdrama: in place of logical, causal, and linear storyline, “irrationality,” “unbalance,” and “mania” make up the crux of the opera.

The text’s fragmentary nature aside, *Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung* incorporates an open formal structure, where the dramaturgical concept can displace, repeat, or omit sections.⁴⁹ Postdramatic theatrical music inherently calls for a mode of reception that embraces openness, decentralization, and dissolution, challenging the traditional expectation of a unified and coherent perception. Therefore, as much as its fragmented textual formation, the open formal construction of *Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung* defined by its ten, pliable scenes, grant the opera a postdramatic character (Table 3).

In this chamber opera, the sole vocalist declaims the scattered verses that—using metaphorical, grotesque snakes, angels, devils, worms, and puppets—depict an allegorical gala night, where the audience experiences life as a musical play centered around the notion of madness. Furthermore, since *Wahnsinn das ist der Seele der Handlung* calls for integrating an onstage string quartet—the only performing force involved in the opera alongside vocalist—its mise-en-scène somewhat alludes to the Partchian postdramatic corporeality: the onstage materiality and synthesis of music, text, performers, and attendees in the hall, as well as an electronic tape component.⁵⁰

The use of electronic tape in *Wahnsinn das ist der Seele der Handlung* that continuously records and replays the performance with eight seconds of delay establishes a simultaneous, repetitive stage text—imitative, superimposed repetitions of the customary plot that unsettles the customary, linear, time-based narrative.⁵¹ This canon of not only the instrumental sounds, but also the recited poetry, create polyphonic parallel trajectories. Articulating the essentiality of parallel trajectories in the postdramatic theater, Lehmann affirms: “In certain

48 Sharon, *A New Philosophy of Opera*, 259.

49 In my conversations with Stahnke (multiple sessions, summer 2015), he stated that he had studied Umberto Eco’s book *Opera aperta* (1962) that presented the concept of openness, as well as multiple meanings and interpretations, in art and literature; English translated version: Eco, *The Open Work* (trans. Cancogni).

50 As I witnessed, in the 2012 State Opera Berlin production, the attendees sat on and around the stage, integrated in the mise-en-scène. The string quartet sat and performed at the back of the stage but stood up and moved to the center later in the opera. See Operabase, “*Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung*.”

51 *Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung*’s score is available via MusicaNeo: <https://www.musicaneo.com/>; No released audio recording of the opera exists.

<p>1. Vorspiel: Die Schlange betrog mich die Schlange die Schlange betrog mich und ich aß ich aß die Schlange die Schlange betrog mich doch</p>	<p>Immermehr Immermehr Immermehr und die Narren kriegen's nicht sie jagen im Kreis immer zum selben Punkt zurück zurück zurück rück rück du bist das Alles für mich Schatz ja ja ja ja du bist das Alles für mich Schatz wonach meine Seele sich geseht eine grüne Insel in der See Schatz eine Quelle und ein Heiligtum ganz umflochten mit Zauberfrüchten und Blumen und alle Blumen waren mein mein mein meine Blumen meine Blumen</p>	<p>etwas schlängelt sich von draußen heran etwas Blutrotes Azrael etwas Kriechendes dringt ein Fürst der dunklen Mächte und des Grabs Erbarmen lass mich jetzt nicht umkommen meine Paradieshoffnung blüht von außerhalb etwas Ungeziefer von außerhalb Beißwerkzeuge und die Engel heulen Beißwerkzeuge etwas mich es mich es frisst es im Menschenblut mich auf es frisst frisst frisst es frisst Engel Engel Az- mich ra- auf el Beißwerkzeuge Ungeziefer frisst mich frisst mich Engel Engel Azrael es frisst frisst frisst über die zitternde Gestalt fiel der Vorhang und die Engel im Theater nicken sich traurig zu und bestätigen das Spiel heiße Menschenkind aber der Held sei</p>
<p>2. Sphärenmusik I: Oho dies ist eine Galanacht dies ist eine Galanacht oho eine Galanacht Galanacht in diesen einsamen Zeiten eine Engelschar sitzt im Theater um ein Spiel voller Hoffnungen und Ängste zu seh'n und Wahnsinn und noch mehr Sünde und Horror und Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung Wahnsinn ist die Seele der Handlung Wahnsinn die Seele Wahnsinn und das Quartett atmet die Musik der Sphären und die Sängerin geschaffen nach Gottes Ebenbild murmelt unverständlich daher</p>	<p>5. Knarrmusik: oh Traum zu schön warst du zu dauern - und alle alle Blumen waren mein meine Blumen - stumm meine Blumen</p>	<p>9. Tusch: Fresser Wurm Fresser Wurm</p> <p>10. Sphärenmusik III: Und das Quartett atmet die Musik der Sphäre</p>
<p>3. Sphärenmusik II: Oho dies ist eine Galanacht Ehre sei Gott in der Höh' eine Galanacht, Galanacht und die Sängerin flattert hin hin und her auf Befehl eines riesigen formlosen Schattens Schattens - hin hin hin und her - der die Szenerie vor und zurückschiebt - vor hin hin hin und her und zurück eine Puppe die kommt und geht geht hin geht kommt geht geht und geht Puppe kommt geht zurück vor hin Puppe her hin hin her Puppe geht Puppe</p>	<p>6. Herbstmusik: Damals als ich ein Kind war als die Sonne um mich rollte mit ihrem gold'nen Herbstton damals damals als ich ein Kind war wurde aus einem Abgrund von Gut und Böse das Geheimnis herausgezogen das mich weiter umklammert aus der Wolke die für mich die Gestalt eines Dämons annahm eines Dämons oho dies ist eine Galanacht eine Engelschar sitzt im Theater um ein Spiel voller Hoffnungen zu sehn bleib bleib Azrael.</p>	<p>7. Teufelssolo: Lass deine Hand ein wenig bei mir - mehr mehr mehr mehr</p>
<p>4. Galamusik: Ach ja dies ist eine Galanacht und keine Sorge das Narrendrama soll nicht vergessen werden mit seiner Phantomjagd nach</p>	<p>8. Wurmmusik: Still psst etwas kriecht heran etwas</p>	<p>8. Wurmmusik: Still psst etwas kriecht heran etwas</p>

Table 3—Sections and text in Manfred Stahnke's *Wahnsinn das ist der Seele der Handlung*; Composer's personal library, autograph score.

performances, the visible events on stage are surrounded and complemented by a second reality of all manner of sounds, music, voices and noise structures, so that one has to speak of the simultaneous existence of a second 'auditory

stage’.”⁵² In *Wahnsinn das ist der Seele der Handlung*, Stahnke employs the live electronic tape as a second audible layer. Superimposed on a pre-conceived video projection—along the vocalist, audience, and the string quartet as parts of the dramaturgical concept—it creates a postdramatic, multimedia simultaneity.⁵³ Using electronics as a tool to forge concurrent realities also underpins *Orpheus Kristall*, Stahnke’s opera in two media and five scenes, for onstage and remote internet musicians.⁵⁴

In *Orpheus Kristall*, the artists involved, including the composer and the librettist Simone Homem de Mello (born 1969), reinterpreted the Orpheus myth; their version demonstrates postdramatic traits by obscuring a clear storyline. “This opera does not tell a story, which is rather pushed far behind; only an echo of the story remains to be heard,” notes Stahnke.⁵⁵ He considers, however, at least, two *possible* storylines: first, the classic story of Orpheus’s descend to Hades and his failed effort to retrieve Eurydice. Second, a transformation of the original myth, where Orpheus tries to escape from the underworld, but Eurydice seduces him back.⁵⁶ Both conflicting plots disrupt the dramatic narrative to generate coinciding storylines.

Orpheus remembers a love, and three female figures appear as a phantasm of Orpheus’s mind. These three characters embody the three-headed “Cerberus,” the guardian of Hades, who, in a departure from the original myth, summons Orpheus. Cerberus, then, splits into three women: a Medusa-type (soprano), who wants to captivate Orpheus through Orpheus’s gaze on Medusa; a Sibyl-type (mezzo-soprano), enigmatic, often vague, digressive, reflective; an Ariadne-type (mezzo-soprano), more maternal, guiding, and driving. These phantasms become the active figures in the inner world of Orpheus—his cold, empty *Kristall* (crystal). In a reversal of the mythological story, they want to recreate Orpheus.

In *Orpheus Kristall*, Orpheus attempts to face the loss of Eurydice in a world that extends beyond the boundary of the stage. From New York and Berkeley to Amsterdam, the composer adds some other stages across the world to Orpheus’s main territory, connected to the hall in Munich via the internet. Using the real-time internet interface “Quintet.net” developed by multimedia composer Georg Hajdu (born 1960), the remote musicians receive the onstage events audio-visually,

52 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 88.

53 For theories and practices related to integrating electronic media in (music-)theatrical projects, see Chapple and Kattenbelt, eds., *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*; Dixon, *Digital Performance*; Packer and Jordan, eds., *Multimedia from Wagner to Virtual Reality*; Benford, “Performing Musical Interactions.”

54 *Orpheus Kristall* was staged in Munich during the 2002 “Münchener Biennale: Internationales Festival für neues Musiktheater” that featured as its central theme “Oper als virtuelle Realität.” See Münchener Biennale, “Orpheus Kristall.”

55 “Trotzdem ist diese ‚Oper‘ kein Ding, das eine Geschichte erzählt. Die Geschichte ist eher so tief eingesickert, dass nur ihr Echo zu hören bleibt.” Stahnke, “Orpheus unter den ganzen Zahlen,” 196. Hereafter, all translations are mine.

56 Bargrzan, “Technology, Microtonality, and Mediation,” 13–14.

11 12 13 14 15 16

Subb. Subbassmarimba

Die MIDI-Reaktionen werden in den Tonhöhen "gefiltert". Nur die unten notierten Teiltöne kommen im "Filter" vor:

über G bis Ton 33 etc. bis Ton 33

8va 8va

Netz

Zugeschaltete Internet-Musiker hören sowohl den Bariton als auch die Percussion via MIDI und reagieren via MIDI.

Netzaktivität wie ein Schatten, gefiltert auf Fundamentalton G: Naturtöne 1 - 33 Netz ausschalten simile

Bar.

reine Sept finden libre, Worte werden erahnbar

o a o u a un-ter a o-ber-to

Vc.1

Kb.

Fundamentaltöne:
G (G)

Example 1—Manfred Stahnke, *Orpheus Kristall*, Scene 1, mm. 11-16; Contrabass provides the fundamental tone G, upon which the baritone sings, among other intervals, a pure (just) seventh. The incoming improvisations of the remote musicians are filtered up to the 33rd overtone of the fundamental tone, then, projected in the hall; Score excerpt reproduced with the permission of Manfred Stahnke; Composer's personal library, autograph score.

then, react and improvise.⁵⁷ The engineers in the main hall filter the streamed improvisations through their spectrums of partials and certain sound samples, then, superimpose them upon the stage music (Example 1). Such overlapping soundscapes that realize a non-linear, multivalent orbit result in simultaneity, non-linearity, and de-hierarchization. They weaken the centrality of a time-based narrative and shape *Orpheus Kristall*'s postdramatic structure.

Within this extended world, Orpheus agonizes over his memories of falling in love with Eurydice, winning her, and eventually losing her. "He even may have murdered her," says Stahnke, leading to another *possible* element of the opera related to the plot: the desires "to make," "to build," but to "build in vain"; since we cannot "win," we "destroy what we have built."⁵⁸ These *possible* plots coexist. The clash of the storylines, along their density and sparsity dependent on individual moments, predominates in *Orpheus Kristall*.

Such parallel narratives conceive a chaotic and cryptic postdramatic structure. While discussing ambiguity and polyvalence, Lehmann refers to Marianne van Kerkhoven's interpretation of new theatrical forms based on the chaos theory. This perspective posits that reality comprises fluid and unstable systems rather than self-contained, closed structures. In response, the arts adopt strategies of ambiguity, multiplicity of meaning, and simultaneity. Stahnke's stage piece reflects this through a dramaturgy that constructs partial, provisional frameworks instead of cohesive, unified narratives. The pursuit of synthesis is relinquished in favor of cultivating the intensity and richness of discrete, concentrated moments.⁵⁹ *Orpheus Kristall*, thus, rejects synthesis, resulting from the dialectical actions intrinsic to the dramatic tradition. Based on the dialectic of "plethora and deprivation"—or "plenitude and emptiness"—a germane characteristic of experimental theatrical music, instead it features postdramatic tendencies. Its connection to the concept of nature and mythology also reflects these tendencies.⁶⁰

The myth of Orpheus presents a figure whose music exerts transformative power over nature and humanity, embodying animistic and shamanistic principles. Orpheus does not merely charm; he commands stones, animals, and plants, asserting dominion over the cosmos. Stahnke's *Orpheus Kristall* reconceptualizes this archetype by reframing Orpheus as a mediator between ancient ritual and modern sonic experimentation, translating shamanic symbolism into a microtonal, crystalline sound world. Stahnke, therefore, addresses the following correlations of the original Orpheus myth, as well as his own rendered version, and the concept of nature:

57 Hajdu, "Aktualität eines Mythos," 47–50. See also Hajdu, "Quintet.net."

58 "Er hat sie vielleicht auch gemordet, das ist eine mögliche Komponente in unserer Oper. Das hat uns die Texterin nahegebracht: Das Bauen, aber das Umsonstbauen, weil ich die Welt nicht gewinnen kann, deshalb zerstöre ich sie." Bargrizon, "Aspekte mikrotonaler Komposition," 108.

59 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 83; Van Kerkhoven, "The Weight of Time," 63–66.

60 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 89.

Orpheus is a magician, who, through his music, reaches out to stones, animals, and plants. He has power over the cosmos, upon the humans. It is “animism,” considering nature as the spirit of everything and everyone, but also “shamanism,” an ancient culture, that still exists in Siberia, or Korea. Orpheus is a Greek version of the old shamans.⁶¹

As Stahnke does, Lehmann also articulates the merits of the elements of nature, landscape, and scenery, as well as the metamorphosis of old myth to neo-mythical construction, in postdramatic theater, addressing that such aspects result in de-hierarchization of the traditional theater, where the plot-based narrative rules over all components.⁶²

While reducing a plot-based narrative to a minimum, *Orpheus Kristall* builds on the natural element embedded in the ancient myth to transform it into a neo-mythical, existential, postdramatic artwork. Stahnke anchors this transformation in the physicality of sound: his tuning system employs just intonation, derived from the harmonic series, and explores related psychoacoustic phenomena such as difference tones, both of which emerge from natural acoustic laws. These choices root the opera’s sonic architecture in nature, even as its dramaturgy moves beyond traditional narrative. At the same time, Stahnke extends this natural foundation into a technologically mediated realm by incorporating remote performers connected via the internet, creating an expanded ecology of sound that mirrors contemporary existence—still grounded in nature yet increasingly dependent on digital networks.⁶³

Conclusion

Partch viewed the Western music-theatrical tradition as disconnected from its corporeal and ritual roots. He conceived his *Oedipus* to revive these roots, because he considered them existentially relevant, interwoven into his worldview. In *The Bewitched*, then, Partch captured the mid-twentieth century’s zeitgeist, crafting a dance satire unlike any other contemporaneous music-dramatic concept. The “Lost Musicians” in *The Bewitched* emerged from Partch’s experience with young enthusiasts, who, although attracted to his pioneering maverick artistry, still exemplified the children of the age of commercialization and easy access to art as entertainment. Partch transformed his observation and his philosophical grappling to a piece that coexists in the modern, postdramatic theater and,

61 “Orpheus ist ein Zauberer, er ist mit den Steinen, mit den Pflanzen, mit den Tieren verbunden. Er hat Macht über das Universum, über die Menschen. Eigentlich ist das Animismus, die Natur als die Seele des Ganzen zu betrachten, oder Schamanismus, der immer noch in Sibirien, Korea oder Japan existiert, das ist eine uralte Kultur. Orpheus ist sozusagen eine griechische Version der alten Schamanen.” Bargrizan, “Aspekte mikrotonaler Komposition,” 107.

62 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 77–84.

63 *Orpheus Kristall*’s score and streaming audio recording are available via BabelScores: <https://www.babelscores.com/>.

simultaneously, in surreal, magic practices, as do Stahnke's *Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung* and *Orpheus Kristall*.

Both *Wahnsinn das ist die Seele der Handlung* and *Orpheus Kristall* contain simultaneous, fragmentary, and multi-perspective narratives, replacing chronological, linear succession of events. To create postdramatic fabrics, they enunciate the value of juxtaposing individual fragments, avoiding reconciliation and producing perceptual distance. Both works contain sections saturated by density of philosophical and psychological signs—also signified by the superimposition of electronic media—where inherently scattered stage poetics carry the responsibility of a dramatic text. The formats of the vocal parts, distanced from conventional arias and recitatives, also articulate both operas' postdramatic characters.

This article has offered a dynamic analytical lens that bridges musicology and theater studies, illuminating how Partch and Stahnke, despite their historical and cultural distance, converge in their pursuit of a music-theatrical language that resists linear dramaturgy. Its framework not only clarifies their structural and aesthetic strategies but also situates their works within a broader discourse on experimental music drama. Such an approach challenges conventional opera analysis by foregrounding interdisciplinary intersections of sound, performance, and media, offering a paradigm that can reshape how scholars interpret twentieth- and twenty-first-century stage music.

As a potent analytical framework, the theory of postdramatic theater provides an effective methodology and a fresh perspective to deconstruct the seemingly disparate, yet co-functioning, inventive sonic and visual elements, not only in Partch's and Stahnke's music dramas but also other music-theatrical ventures. This theory facilitates an analysis of musical stage works from an interdisciplinary perspective, which can carry on a transformative and lasting effect on the discernment of experimental theatrical music.

Building on this foundation, future research will expand this inquiry to composers who grapple with similar intersections of myth, technology, and corporeality, examining how digital mediation and unconventional dramaturgy, as well as experimental approaches to vocality and intonation, disrupt and reconfigure inherited operatic structures. Such work will illuminate the evolving dramaturgical paradigms of music theater in an era where technological extension and embodied sound coalesce. Ultimately, this trajectory positions music theater as a critical site for negotiating philosophical and technological concerns—a vantage point that promises to advance scholarly discourse and stimulate innovative artistic practice.

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