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Kundry Must Die — Stage Direction and Authenticity

Vitor Moura*

Universidade do Minho

In Nikolaus Lehnhoff's production of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* (English National Opera, 1999), the character of Kundry didn't die at the end of the third act "lifelessly sinking to the ground in front of Parsifal" as mandated by Wagner himself. Instead, she overcomes the "unnatural" separation between men and women and leads Parsifal and the other surviving knights away from the castle of the Grail. Despite its being highly thought provoking and quite consequential with the overall philosophical re-interpretation of the drama by Lehnhoff, this change is nonetheless a betrayal of Wagner's specific instructions.

Some recent bibliography has questioned the merits and indeed the ethics of stage productions that deviate from the original to the point that the work is no longer recognisable as such.¹ There even seems to be a blatant contradiction in the case of opera productions where extreme care is placed upon philological fidelity in the orchestra pit – in the spirit of historical authenticity – while at the same time a radical reinterpretation of plot and historical context is pursued on stage. Some arguments have been produced against extreme liberality in stage direction and, more specifically, in opera. First, that it subscribes to an obsolete metaphysics of being and appearance. Ever since Patrice Chéreau's revolutionary staging of Wagner's *Ring* in Bayreuth (1976) a trend has been set of dressing up characters in unexpected costumes with the intent of displacing them, and indeed the whole plot, from their original cultural ethos. Applied to costumes and sets and the overall social and cultural environment, this "updating" is nowadays pretty much the standard in opera production. Detractors of this stylistic option have argued that this trend is rooted in a misguided metaphysics by considering that whatever the appearance of the

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¹ Cf. Catteau, 2012: 15.

character, its “essence” remains the same, and they counter argue that in theatre appearance *is* the essence. If you change the first, you corrupt the latter because basically “underneath the appearances of Tartufe, Wotan, Falstaff or Don Giovanni there is nothing and no one. These characters are to their complete extent their own appearances and nothing other”.² A related criticism argues that the interpreters compelled to collaborate with this “wrong metaphysics” and the radicalism of at least some of these choices can no longer believe in their roles, resulting in disenchanted and mediocre representations.³

Second, that this kind of stage production derives from prejudice and ignorance regarding different epochs other than the contemporary, which ultimately explains the obsessive need to “update” costumes, settings and behaviours. Third, that it fosters a kind of nullification of what is intrinsically external to our culture, namely by producing “politically correct” versions of what is ultimately incorrigible. In this paper these two objections will be synthesized under a broader criticism, namely the one that argues for the need to respect the original work, the author’s intentional agenda and the idiosyncrasies of its time of inception in order to produce an authentic instance of the work. A fourth objection declares that this trend in opera production is the by-product of a theatrical culture where the role of the producer has been over-emphasized. This fourth objection is also related to questions regarding the definition of authentic performance. Ultimately, there is a moral choice to be made: either we admit to challenge the author’s instructions or we limit the producer’s creativity.⁴ This moral choice is also entrenched in the on-going debate about the definition of “performance” opposing the defenders of performance-qua-interpretation (Wollheim, Carroll) and those who argue in favour of performance-qua-production (Saltz, Osipovich and, more remotely, Rorty and Fish).

Although I’m intuitively inclined to accept the priority of production, there is much to consider in the arguments of more conservative accounts. This is what this paper proposes, a panoramic view of what should count as proper performance of a notational dramatic text. In order to do that,

² Catteau, 2012: 52.

³ “Comment Cassandre peut-elle invoquer l’ombre d’Hector avec son bonnet de la Croix Rouge sur la tête?”, Catteau, 2012: 16.

⁴ Cf. Kidnie, 2009

I'll be juggling with two different kinds of materials. On the one hand, the arguments with which philosophers of music, in particular, have tried to define what should count as "correct" performance. On the other hand, the philosophical discussion about what a theatrical performance is (descriptively as well as normatively). At the intersection of both lines of thought we expect to find some illumination as to whether Kundry should live or die.

I. *Kundry Must Die!*: the Identity of Dramatic Works

Opponents of radicalism in theatre and opera have argued that "appearance" is the essence of a theatrical production and that by changing the former one is actually corrupting the latter. "Appearance" encompasses not only the costumes and the scenographic environment but also the specific plot and conniving that surrounds the cultural framework that surrounds the characters "in a given time and place", motivating their sets of beliefs and desires properly immersed in that *hic et nunc*, including the historical contingencies of her time. One cannot *update* a character – e.g. Don Giovanni turned drug dealer in New York, as in Peter Sellars celebrated version - and expect this network of meaningful characterizations to remain intact. And if the appearance is subverted, the essence is lost: "Don Giovanni, the trader, seduces but no longer defies religious beliefs; from then on, to avenge the dead and to appeal to the justice of God are no longer verisimilar because today's seducers have nothing to fear".⁵ Their proper costumes literally contain their dramas and their eras in an inextricable way and should therefore be preserved as conditions of meaning and dramatic identity.

But how exactly should we distinguish what elements of the characters' appearance are indeed part of their essence? For instance, is Aeneas in Berlioz' *Les Troyens* more meaningfully portrayed as a historically accurate (according to contemporary criteria) Trojan soldier or rather as the idea of what Berlioz believed to be the accurate characterization of a Trojan soldier? Isn't it at least arguable that a more archaeological minded contemporary presentation of Aeneas could also be perceived as severing some

⁵ Catteau, 2012: 54.

of the traits that we find in Berlioz's work? After all, from what we now know, Greek and Trojan societies were much less exuberant than what we can infer from Berlioz's plot and music. A trimmed down Aeneas is a more truthful one? And where lies the boundary between the character's *being* and mere pastiche?

a) Autographic / Allographic

Let us go back for a second just to recall what are arguably the two most operative contemporary ways of establishing the identity of a dramatic work in text and performance: Nelson Goodman's allographic / autographic art distinction and Richard Wollheim's type-token ontology. According to Goodman, autographic artworks are fully determined by their history of production and so every detail of the work is constitutive of its identity (painting, sculpture, etchings); by contrast the identity of allographic artworks can be fully preserved in notational form, which means that any accurately "spelled" copy of the allographic work *is* the work.

Goodman's theory has the advantage of fully acknowledging that in dramatic art the work is located in the performance itself and that performance is not merely an add-on to the text.⁶ However, what could count as a performance of the work is highly restricted since only those performances that comply with the text are genuine. Since accuracy is of the essence, this leads to some strange consequences, some of which are perfectly admitted by Goodman himself:

"Since complete compliance with the score is the only requirement for a genuine instance of a work, the most miserable performance without actual mistakes does count as such an instance, while the most brilliant performance with a single wrong note does not."⁷

Although admitting that the brilliant pianist who inadvertently has failed a couple of notes during her performance may have produced a more aesthetically satisfying version of the sonata than the mediocre student who carefully hits every note, still the former doesn't count as an instance of the work. Also, the many questions that have been raised – namely by musicologists – against Goodman's notion of "correct" script have shown that

⁶ Cf. Kidnie, 2009: 15.

⁷ Goodman, 1976: 186.

this constitutes at least a problematic way of defining the proper ontology of performative arts.

b) Types and Tokens

In this respect, Wollheim's adaptation of Peirce's type-token theory seems to constitute a safer bet than Goodman's. Works of literature and performance are not "objects" because there is no corresponding physical entity. Instead the object is a token of a type (respectively, my copy of *Ulysses* and Joyce's manuscript; tonight's performance of *Der Rosenkavalier* and Strauss's handwritten score).⁸ This entails two important consequences:

- i) That any property of the token which is not simply a consequence of the token's material existence (e.g., Waltraud Meier's height or Christopher Ventris' voice colour in Lehnhoff's *Parsifal*) may be transmitted from the token to its type. This prevents Wollheim's notion of type to become a kind of Platonic ideal form and although the type is immaterial we may still speak of it as having physical properties (imported from the token): "There is nothing that prevents us from saying that Donne's *Satires* are harsh on the ear, or that Dürer's engraving of *St Anthony* has a different texture, or that the conclusion of 'Celeste Aida' is *pianissimo*."⁹ Significantly, in the case of the performative arts there are many properties of the token that will not be transmitted to the type. They are "in excess" of the type and constitute the "element of interpretation" which will shape different performances of the same work. A difficulty here is that it is impossible to tell apart the "element of interpretation" from those properties that will be shared with the type. Wollheim describes this as a chicken-egg problem: without prior knowledge of the "Ideal" work we cannot determine what is essential to either type or token. Therefore we cannot determine whether a particular token is "genuine" or even whether two or more particulars are tokens of the same type.¹⁰ As we shall try to demonstrate a bit later, one way to solve the chicken-egg problem is to think of the relation between token and type as a kind of reflective equilibrium, a continuous shuttle between the dramatic and the literary works.

- ii) This provides the basis for Wollheim's thesis – presently most prominently

⁸ Wollheim, 1980: 75.

⁹ Wollheim, 1980: 82.

¹⁰ Cf. Kidnie, 2009: 18.

defended by Noël Carroll - according to which each performance is an interpretation of a play. This thesis has faced some important contemporary opposition (David Saltz, David Osipovich) arguing in favour of the primacy of production and denying that the relationship between play and performance is one of interpretation.¹¹

The notion that to play a role involves interpretation is already imbedded in many languages. In French, Italian, Spanish or Portuguese, for instance, one can use interchangeably that someone is playing (*jouer, jugar, actuar*) or that she is interpreting (*interpréter / interpretar*) a role. Wollheim acknowledges this analogy and argues against the eliminability of interpretation in the performing arts. He compares what he calls “performative interpretation” – what musicians or players do – with “critical interpretation” the activity of art critics or scholars. “It is, I suggest, no coincidence that this activity, of taking the poem or painting or novel in one way rather than another, is also called interpretation.”¹² The object of interpretation is always the text – musical or literary – and even when we take a performance to be the object for interpretation we are not concerned with the meanings suggested by the performance but rather with the “critical interpretations” of the play implicit in the performance, which is fully paraphraseable. When we interpret a performance, sustains Wollheim, we are always considering possible alternative performances, which would present the original text in a different way: “*we are not suggesting or arguing for alternative ways in which the actual performance might be taken*. Our interpretation is on the occasion of a performance, not about it”.¹³ The obvious outcome is that the performance is perceived as a mere looking glass because the audience “reads through the performance to the play”.¹⁴ This clarifies the parallel between the pair work-critical essay and the pair play-performance.

c) Plays and Recipes

¹¹ “Stage direction [‘mise en scène’] is no longer conceived here as the transfer of one text into a representation, but rather as the scenic production by which an author (the stage director) has all the authority and permission to give form and meaning to the whole performance.” (Pavis, 1996)

¹² Wollheim, 1980: 84.

¹³ Wollheim, 1980: 85.

¹⁴ Saltz, 2001: 299.

Noël Carroll has presented a weaker version of Interpretationism by using “interpretation” in a different sense: instead of comparing performances to critical assessments (as Wollheim does), he compares them to culinary achievements: performative interpretations are like the filling of a recipe.¹⁵ There is however an important difference between the two philosophers. For Wollheim, interpretation was the real function of performances: they provide occasions for interpreting the play and the play remains the focus of the spectator’s attention (in a way, Kundry is already dead even, or especially, if she survives). Carroll, on the other hand, remains silent about the spectator’s real focus of attention.¹⁶

Still, Carroll’s version also has its problems. First, because the metaphor may be taken the other way around: two similar interpretations of a “recipe” may lead to two very different executions: as Saltz puts it, when preparing an apple pie I use Granny Smith apples while the recipe suggested Roma apples. In fact, the performer’s interpretation of the meaning of the play is an interim stage of the production and may very well be compared to the cook’s interpreting the meaning of the recipe. But afterwards, actors and producers move on to make a series of choices that “are consistent with their interpretation” (Saltz, 2001: 303) and there is no reason to call these choices as interpretations. Second, because to accept the analogy between performance and cooking may very well lead us in quite the opposite direction as the one prescribed by Carroll: as the goal of cooking is not to “be true to the recipe” but to prepare a good meal (one that will be evaluated on its own terms) so too the goal of a performance is to produce an engaging and aesthetically satisfactory experience: thus, the spectator very seldom perceives the aesthetic object as being distinct from the production.¹⁷ Third, apple pies are the products of the recipe; but dramatic performances *are* the execution of a play, they are constituted by the act itself of saying the lines and following the stage directions. The way an actor follows the play’s instructions is aesthetically relevant but the way a cook follows a recipe is not important, i.e., the way she chooses to execute the recipe doesn’t matter.

What this all shows is that the difference between recipes and perform-

¹⁵ Cf. Carroll 2001, 2006.

¹⁶ Saltz, 2001: 302.

¹⁷ Saltz, 2001: 303.

ances is not to be found in the intrinsic properties of the type (plays or recipes) or of the activities involved in following the respective instructions but “simply in the audience’s perception”.¹⁸

Still, although a contemporary shift from interpretation to production seems to constitute an effective way to reply against those who complain about directors who drift away from the text – see section 3 below –, the decision whether Kundry should live or die cannot be simply answered as constituting a pure production option. Kundry’s survival is far more disruptive than D. Giovanni’s change of profession or Fidelio’s playing Gameboy in prison. To return to Wollheim’s type-token model, it clearly epitomizes a philosophical twist in the overall meaning of the original plot and is thus one of those properties that can be transmitted to the type. Even in Saltz’s model, it is an option taken at the interpretative interim stage. Therefore, it raises other questions concerning the limits of interpretation and the distinction between a proper instance of the work (a compliant instance, in Goodmanian terms) and an adaptation. To follow this we now turn to the way the question has been tackled by philosophers of music.

d) Intentionalist Authenticity

The discussion surrounding the notion of authentic musical performance is extremely diverse and we could list the presence of at least four major arguments in favour of historically *controlled* performances: the intentional, the sonic, the practical and the phenomenological.¹⁹ In view of our prob-

¹⁸ Saltz, 2001: 304.

¹⁹ First, the “intentionalist” argument that holds that historically minded performances are the best way to carry out the author’s intentions and that to follow these instructions is both an ethic and an aesthetic duty. Secondly, the “sonic” argument: performers should try to come as close as possible to the original sonic experience of the work. Thirdly, the “practical” argument: the replication of the past sonic, or dramatic, event is not exactly the goal of musical performance but it should nonetheless be undertaken according to the original modes or practices. And finally there is the “phenomenological” argument according to which the performance truthfulness lies on the ability to reproduce the experience of the original piece by trying to accomplish an object similar to the one experienced by the initial audience. This last proposal is much more flexible when it comes to define the range of what correct performances could be like but it poses nonetheless some intriguing questions. For instance, if properties such as “surprising”, “original” and “daring” were historically attributed to the work in its original context, then they

lem I shall concentrate on the notion of intentionalist authenticity and hopefully withdraw some criteria to measure the extent to which we are we conditioned by the author's plot or *didascalia*: must Kundry die?

The "intentionalist" argument holds that historically minded performances are the best way to carry out the author's intentions and that to follow these instructions is both an ethic and an aesthetic duty. Some authors distinguish between "strong intentions" (those that must be carried out in order for the performance to comply as performance of that work) and "weak intentions" (those that are to some extent discardable or negligible) and the question emerges as to what could count as a weak intention. For instance, when we consider those works whose libretti and didascalia were written down by the composer himself (e.g., Berlioz or Wagner) could stage directions be considered part of the "weaker intentions" group?

Intentionalists like to invoke the argument of analyticity that holds that being true to the manifestations of the author is integral to the very notion of what it is to perform a musical work. On ethical terms, being true to the composer's intentions can easily be seen as a duty not only towards the composer herself but also towards the audience. On aesthetic terms, it is argued that being true to the composer's intentions is at least a safe bet towards attaining a good and aesthetically more rewarding performance.

Naturally, any mentioning of "intentions" brings along the charge of "intentional fallacy". Determining the author's intentions vis-à-vis the performance is often difficult to accomplish although it is also true that in many cases we already hold reliable information that would eventually bring forth the author's intentions. For instance, the original 1882 settings of *Parsifal*, as authorized by Wagner himself, were only destroyed in the 1930's and there are enough photographic documents that could justify an archaeological performance of the work.

Of course, Beardsley and Wimsatt's don't object to the recognition of intentions *in* the work but rather to the relevance of the author's intentions

must have produced an experience characterized by "surprise", "perplexity" or even "outrageousness". What would then count as a phenomenologically correct performance of that work? Would this not ultimately justify the kind of theatrical "audacities" that many find so objectionable? Much of this discussion regarding the concept of correct performance is specific to music, particularly in the case of arguments two and three.

outside the work, and namely that these external intentions are necessary to establish the content and meaning of the work – the need to “consult the oracle”, as they put it. *Strictu sensu*, the “intentional fallacy” affects this esoteric kind of intentions and not the explicit intentions in the work.

But even if we take for granted that we can reach a reasonable insight of the author’s intentional agenda stashed within the work, particularly regarding the different ways of performing her works, we have to acknowledge that intentions are not all the same and that they have different degrees of importance. Randall Dipert has distinguished 3 levels of musical intentions. First, low-level intentions, which include the choice of instruments, the fingering, etc. Second, middle-level intentions, which are those that relate to the intended sound: “temperament, timbre, attack, pitch, and vibrato”. And third, high-level intentions, “which are the effects the composer intends to produce in the listener”. Significantly, these intentions are sometimes incompatible among themselves and one of the tasks of the performer is to decide what level should be granted more weight, assuming that high-level intentions usually take precedence. For instance, in the third number of the *Magnificat* in D, Bach’s low-level intention was to use the oboe d’amore of his day in order to produce a given tone quality (middle-level intention) and thus to achieve an expressive effect on his audience (high-level intention).

“But that tone and quality and, hence, the effect Bach wanted, might be better achieved today, given the conditions of modern musical performance, by the modern French oboe d’amore (...). That being the case, we cannot serve Bach’s middle – and high-level intentions most fully without going against his low-level ones”²⁰

Two consecutive problems arise in this respect: first, that it is not always easy to distinguish between *strong* and *weak* intentions, i.e., those that determine what a correct performance of a given work should be like and those that are merely presented as advices or recommendations. Second, that many times the intentions are not fully consistent with each other if not altogether contradictory among themselves. The problems with distinguishing strong and weak intentions are even more complicated in

²⁰ Kivy, 1988: 225.

the case of opera if we inscribe stage directions, settings and didascalia in the author's intentional agenda. One could imagine that Wagner's highest-level intention in *Parsifal* was to celebrate a dying cultural ethos, one that his audience would relate to and feel threatened by, say, a commoditized society. To forsake earthly love – through the alienation of women – and adopt a mystical connection to the universe was part of that ethos' set of values. To this time and age this message seems exhausted and doesn't seem likely to appeal to an informed audience. A renewed bond between Parsifal and Kundry – instead of her suppression –, at the end of the opera, does seem to set a more universal tone and indeed an *Aufhebung* of Wagner's own over sexualized views. It also has the interesting consequence of enhancing the serenity and all-embracing quality of much of this opera's music (or at least, of removing one serious moral obstacle to its enjoyment) and thus reinforce a high-level musical intention.

This question leads to a second problem. In cases where the intentional agenda of the author is not fully consistent, can we still talk about intentionalist authenticity? Lower-level intentions are usually more accessible than higher-level intentions. But if in order to fulfil the majority of the author's intentions one sacrifices some higher-level intention, that does not seem very authentic (that is why many historic-oriented performers follow the more safe and explicit lower-level intentions and neglect middle and high level ones). Again, the case gets worse if we are talking about stage direction.

There are other reasons by which intentions can become incompatible among themselves. With time, a given network of intentions may lose its consistency and lead to performances that are no longer pleasing. For instance, the surprise effect of using exotic instruments, such as early uses of the clarinet in works by Handel, Vivaldi or Rameau, has long ceased to exist given the vulgarization of the use of that instrument. Thus, a first level intention is now incompatible with a third level intention. If circumstances may alter the success of certain intentions, then it seems reasonable to argue that it is impossible for the composer to have full knowledge of what will work better for future performances of her work. In this sense, the substitution of the clarinet for a more exotic instrument – considering today's expectations –, the fashionable update of D. Giovanni's costumes or Kundry's survival may very well become ways of better attaining the

composer's higher intentions.

Defenders of intentionalist authenticity could reply in two ways: 1) there is not such thing as higher intentions; 2) lower level intentions are never incompatible with higher level intentions, at least not in a definitive way. The first reply sustains that if higher intentions did exist then composers would be willing to sacrifice performative instructions for anything that would cause the intended effects in the minds of the listener.²¹ The only relevant higher-level intention would be that the audience hears a performance that satisfies the middle level intentions, i.e., the prescribed sonic experience. But this seems to apply only to a limited number of musical works, namely those that are somehow affiliated with the idea of artworks as autonomous, formal aesthetic works. For many others, the arousal of emotions in the audience was clearly an essential intention of the work – and this was definitely the case with *Parsifal*.

According to the second reply, the cultivated listener will always be able to adapt herself to the original conditions and will resist falling into the temptation of neglecting the work's *Zeitgeist*. This suggests, of course, that one may always “return” to a set of expectations that will fulfil the higher intentions leaving intact the lower ones. However, this seems to imply, for instance, that harpsichords or lutes would somehow lose their antiquated aura and be again heard as natural and popular instruments and that modern audiences would always be able to revive the original hearing conditions, always corresponding to the higher intentions without changes in the lower intentions. And this is not plausible.

e) *A Fine and Delicate Balance*

It is a historical fact that most operas were conceived as *ontologically flexible*. It is doubtful that Haendel or Donizetti conceived the first versions of their respective operas as constituting the definite work. They were rather conceived as recipes that could undergo changes in view of circumstantial demands. Wagner changed many segments of *Tristan und Isolde* during rehearsals in order to adapt to the conditions of its first performance – particularly because of the problems the original score presented to his own choice of singers. The same happened with Meyerbeer's *The Prophet*

²¹ Cf. Edidin, 1991: 414

with the composer ending up by preferring the “altered” version. All these cases present important exceptions to considering the composer’s original work as a repository of sovereign intentions, an *Urtext* never to be defied.

Nevertheless, many critics hold that works of art are like organic entities and that any change in details will compromise the whole. The axiom of delicate balance could be traced back to Aristotle’s *Poetics* (51a) when he compares a well-crafted tragedy to a living organism. Any alteration of one of its elements alters the whole. Of course, this organicity is perceived as a characteristic of fine works of art and an essential criterion for distinguishing between better works and lesser pieces. This implies that respecting the full agenda of intentions of an artwork is only commendable in the case of works that present a very high level of organic interdependence. This introduces some relativity in the axiom because the obligation to comply with the composer’s full agenda of intentions depends upon the degree of organicity presented by the work. Since not every musical work adhere to the axiom then, at least for works that don’t adhere, one cannot sustain that the alteration of an element will necessarily produce an inferior version of the whole.

Peter Kivy extends his discussion of the axiom by considering two meanings of delicate balance: the objective and the impressionistic. The first states that any minute change of the work’s elements jeopardizes its cohesion and quality. The second argues that perfect balance is more an impression induced in the spectator and can accommodate certain changes within reasonable boundaries. The first being overly ambitious and demanding, it is the second meaning that better corresponds to the spirit of the axiom. However, this second version does not correspond to the spirit of intentionalist authenticity since it does not validate the fact that the author’s intentions should be maintained at all cost. And if that sense of completeness and coherence can be attained without a careful preservation of those intentions, then the burden of proof is passed onto the defender of intentional authenticity: she now has to demonstrate that respecting the author’s intentions always and necessarily result in aesthetically more pleasing performances of the work. Kivy seems right in arguing that we cannot rule out that “disrespectful” performances may have other aesthetic merits – like that of constituting an original *ontophany* for the spectator, who is then able to repeat the experience of discovery of the

original spectators - and thus be at least equally aesthetically rewarding.

The axiom of delicate balance also seems to vary according to the artistic excellence of the composers. It is far more plausible to believe that alterations introduced in the staging of a Wagner opera will produce an inferior work than to believe it would also be necessarily the case with a work by Donizetti. But even in the case of undisputed masterpieces this axiom should not be perceived as universal truth. Kivy compares the axiom to Leibniz's theodicy (Kivy, 1995: 171-173): the work performed according to the axiom of delicate balance is comparable to the best of all possible worlds. Just like Leibniz, its proponent wants us to accept it *a priori*, i.e., independently of the actual results of performing the work according to the author's intentions. Just like tokens of earthly misery and sufferance will not affect the fact that this is the best possible world (the global outcome, from a divine perspective, will always be *in toto* better than the alternatives) so mediocre performances that result from strict obedience to the author's intentions won't suffice to show that this is not the best way of performing the work.

Consider again our previous line of reasoning. Kundry's not dying at the end is a way of stressing the universal appeal of *Parsifal* in a secularized and far less sexualized society than Wagner's. Arguably, to the ears of contemporary audiences, it intensifies some important aesthetic properties of the music, like its serenity and equanimity.²² The defender of the axiom could characterize this as an illusion resulting from a lack of familiarity with the opera as a whole. A return to the original script will suffice to show that the author's recipe is always the best option. And even if the great majority of contemporary operagoers would prefer the updated version, still it would be possible to defend that from an overall, superior, far more general perspective – one that is eventually impossible to fully grasp, such as Leibniz's God view – the accepted alterations jeopardize the whole. One is left with an epistemological choice: do we accept *a priori* reasons for sustaining that the author's choices are always the best, à la Leibniz, or do we place all choices in the "trial of experience" (Kivy) and accept only those that receive a positive verdict?

²² This echoes the arguments of ethicists according to which the subtraction of any ethical flaw in an artwork would also increment the work's aesthetic appeal.

2. *Should Kundry Die?* : Performative Counterfactualism

Some detractors of intentional authenticity, such as Peter Kivy, hold that intentions are a function of what is available to the composer at the time when she wrote the piece. If the frame of possibilities were different – say, broader – would she have made the same choices? Counterfactually, it is always possible – if not desirable – to think what the composer would intend given the present range of possibilities. If we adopt a strict intentionalist view and try and follow the author's options exactly as she has intended them in the original context, we lack precisely the knowledge of the circumstances and availability of options that have determined those intentions – and therefore one can hardly speak of understanding the author's intentions. On the other hand, if we adopt a counterfactual view and try to imagine what would the author want given the current set of possibilities we may find ourselves barred from inferring an updated set of intentions given all the overwhelming and perplexing questions that arise out of the temporal and cultural distance between the composer's time and our own.

Peter Kivy thinks that counterfactualism is simply a question of using a basic rule for inferring the intentions of other people and that these are always relative to the options available. This inference is sometimes a test to our knowledge of others and our awareness of their innermost desires: Wanda wishes to be a nurse but we know that, if her family's financial status would change, she would rather be a medical doctor, *even if she had never expressed that desire before*. In the case of composers of the past, our inference powers face the challenge of historic and cultural difference. If William, the man born in Bristol in 1769, chose to be a sailor when the alternative was to be a blacksmith, one can infer that, had he been born in 1991, he would probably choose a relatively challenging and adventurous profession, such as pilot or astronaut (not sailor, much less challenging and adventurous now that in the XVIII century). Basically, what Kivy shows is that some of the counterfactual questions, in particular those that assist us in projecting intentions from the past into the present, are fully intelligible and many find plausible answers. This implies that to literally follow the author's intentions only becomes the default position when historic and cultural differences make it impossible to come up with reasonable ques-

tions and / or plausible answers. Still, Kivy argues that, even the hard cases (“must Kundry die?”), one can still reach some intelligible and answerable questions.

Some authors argue that this counterfactual updating of intentions is as absurd as asking whether I would like Wagner if I were a penguin: nothing could be me and be a penguin and nothing could be Bach and live today.²³ However, it seems right to consider that counterfactuals do have different degrees of plausibility: it is less implausible to imagine Bach being teleported to the XXI century than to imagine an entity that would be me *and* a penguin. Other authors argue that it is wrong to imagine that if, for instance, Bach would still be alive today he would still be interested in the music he wrote more than 250 years ago or that, considering all the options available today, he would still be writing the same kind of music.²⁴ The counterfactualist replies that the options available to our hypothetical Bach are restricted to the fact that we are considering how to perform his works today.²⁵

A third objection against counterfactualism accepts that many counterfactual questions are indeed intelligible and suggest reasonable answers but that it is also counterfactually reasonable to assume that authors would nevertheless hold on to their initial options. Kivy replies that from the fact that an author has intended something in accordance with her context of available options and conditions does not follow that she would intend exactly the same thing given our current context – the context changes the intentional path. Also, a composer’s high-level intentions should always be taken as a basis for inferring what she would want in the present context, and *nothing can replace that inference*. To ignore this is indeed a case of historic inauthenticity.

Other opponents to counterfactualism (like Stephen Davies) accept that it is plausible that composers could engage on some kind of counterfactualism but suggest that they would nevertheless prefer the original options. Counterfactualism, of course, suggests otherwise. Intentions are related to the available set of options. If we counterfactually increase the range of those options we also increase the basis for a careful discussion

²³ Young, 1996: 198.

²⁴ Butt, 2002: 77.

²⁵ Lopes, 2010: 245.

of what would work better in the present circumstances. This works as a kind of reflective balance by which we compare the way the composer worked within her given set of options with the widened contemporary set of options. The composer's choices act as a focuser assisting in the task of choosing the best available options; it is a way of seeing our objective in the distance. It is not so much a question of asking whether the composer would "prefer" a more contemporary reading but rather whether she would agree with its terms. To use a musical metaphor, this way of thinking about the interpretation of works is a kind of transcription. And if changes in instrumentation, pace or rubato in order to adjust to different acoustic environments constitute a common practice within that kind of reflective equilibrium, why should staging instructions be more rigid and inflexible?

This leads to the question of how far can we go in entertaining different options before we start messing with the very identity of the work.²⁶ It could be said that beyond a certain point the *new* intentions of a composer are no longer intentions about the performance of the work but are rather constitutive of a new version or a new work altogether. Naturally, this objection is supported by an ontology of musical works that stipulates a rather strict pattern of tolerance and inflexible conditions of compliance with the original work. Of course, it is easier to deflect this kind of objections if we are talking about musical options in which case it is rather easy to agree on reasonable limits of tolerance (one could choose to play a given line written by Bach for an oboe d'amore by a cor anglais but not by a trumpet, for instance²⁷). It is rather more difficult to accept that the fact that Kundry doesn't die at the end of Parsifal does not affect the identity of the work, its "delicate balance".

Counterfactualism is indeed a powerful breakthrough in considering the work's "authenticity". Nevertheless, all things considered, counterfactualism still remains a way of acknowledging the author as the supreme authority albeit in a mitigated way. It's all about the performer's ability to engage on a kind of "theory of mind" with the author at its centre. Its difference *vis-à-vis* intentionalism is not one of nature but of the degree.

²⁶ Davies, 2001: 223-224.

²⁷ Lopes, 2010: 255.

What happens then if we turn our back to the author?

3. *Kundry May Live* : A Reflective Equilibrium

Against the ontology of dramatic works proposed by philosophers such as Goodman, Wollheim or Carroll, recent authors such as David Saltz, David Osipovich or Margaret Kidnie have tried to show that mere “interpretation” is not sufficient to describe the relationship between a literary play and its performances. For one, the parallel Wollheim establishes between critical accounts and dramatic performances doesn’t hold. The concept of “interpretation” really seems to exhaust the relationship between a critical assessment of, say, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and the play *Pelléas et Mélisande*: if something is a critical assessment *and* interprets *Pelléas et Mélisande* it can only be a critical assessment of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. However, the fact that something is a performance and interprets *Pelléas et Mélisande* is not sufficient to make it a performance of Maeterlinck’s play.²⁸ Musical poems by Sibelius or Schönberg are both performances and interpretations of the play, and David Saltz would also argue that a lecture on *Pelléas et Mélisande* is a kind of performance but not a performance of *Pelléas et Mélisande*.²⁹ Also, it is often when the elements of the performance depart more radically from the text being “interpreted” that the spectator becomes aware of the performance as functioning “effectively and unambiguously” as an interpretation.

Consequently, it is denied that the immediate type of a performance is an interpretation and it is proposed instead that it is rather a production. This paradigm shift turns theatrical experience less centred on an “allographic” object but rather based on the “autographic” instant of production.

Saltz and Osipovich seem to be closer to a description of the phenomenology of the theatrical spectator, who is more involved with the production than attentive to the text - Saltz goes even so far as to add that “watching-for-the-play” (i.e., looking for the interpretation) only manages to describe the idiosyncratic experience of the drama critic, not that of

²⁸ Saltz, 2001: 300.

²⁹ Saltz, 2001: 300.

the common spectator. However, this reference to the phenomenology of spectators may easily backfire. We may accept that the circumstantial spectator may be focused entirely on the production values but it also seems right to assume that the more common and moderately cultivated spectator is involved with a more or less conscious shuttle between the current production, previous productions and knowledge of the text. This could be described, again, as a kind of reflective equilibrium. The text retains its heuristic character above the causal connection between production and play and suggests a different way to think about the dramatic object.

One way to perceive that a simple exclusively disjunctive option between interpretation and production is wrong is also grounded in the spectator's phenomenology. There is a kind of Oedipus effect or self-contradiction involved in pursuing either option. A super radical production may very well trigger in the audience a kind of première feeling in which awareness of the text becomes prominent (it is, after all, the spectator's main reference and her lifejacket in tormented waters), and therefore appear as oddly authentic. A hyper-conservative and respectful production may appear strangely anachronistic and pastiche-like with production options obstructing a clear connection to the text. There is a kind of pragmatic truth of the dramatic work³⁰ that is being continuously produced through the reflective equilibrium between play and performance. Any lack of consensus regarding a given production ("should *Kundry* die or not?") marks the present limits of a dramatic work and its pragmatically built ontology.

The question whether *Kundry* should live or die becomes then salient in the mind of the spectator and judged against Wagner's initial prescriptions, the history of this opera's production in the last 133 years, and our own history of versions of that opera. This questioning, I take it, is a way through which *Parsifal* becomes an opera for our time.

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³⁰ Cf. Kidnie, 2009:

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