

A Union of Forms:
Contemporary Interpretation and Application of Wagner's
Gesamtkunstwerk Within the Mediums of
Music and Poetry

by

Nathan Z. Mondschein
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Introduction

In his 1849 essay, *The Art-Work of the Future*, composer Richard Wagner writes “The Arts of Dance, of Tone, of Poetry, are each confined within their several bounds; in contact with these bounds each feels herself unfree, be it not that, across their common boundary, she reaches out her hand to her neighboring art in unrestrained acknowledgement of love.”¹ This quote most clearly articulates the foundational necessity of Wagner’s philosophy of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “Total Work of Art.” This theory, among other things, asserts that the inherent limitations of individual art forms necessitate cooperative compositional practices between multiple artistic mediums in order to achieve an honest, authentic and emotionally compelling final product.

While my path to this project did not begin with such a conceptual notion, it was inspired by a personal dilemma closely linked to Wagner’s foundational theories: For the majority of my artistic career, whether deliberately or simply by product of habit, my tendency had always been to maintain a very tangible distance between my composition and my audience, most frequently by removing myself from, or at the very least, decreasing my presence within the narrative of my work. While this strategy successfully allowed me to maintain my desired level of anonymity, it also had a remarkably limiting effect upon my work, and the degree to which my presentation was perceived as authentic, honest, and vulnerable. In response, the past year has been marked by my increasingly deliberate attempts towards learning how

¹ Wagner, 98

better to insert myself and my own vulnerabilities into my compositions, without trending towards the pitfall of exhibitionism and over-sharing that can so effectively obliterate the accessibility of a piece of artistic expression.

In many ways, my interest in the concept of a “Total Art” was the product of my aforementioned progression and desire to widen the scope of my work, coupled with a deep-seeded love for, and belief in the interconnected nature of Music and Poetry. Attempts to develop and refine my work in each medium eventually led me to gain interest in, and further investigate the practice of collaborative composition involving the two, which ultimately led me to Wagner’s foundational theories, and the aforementioned quotation.

In this essay, I will investigate the foundational precepts of Wagner’s theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as well as subsequent interpretation and critique, as a means of articulating those principles governing my own compositional and analytical practices involving collaboration between music and poetry. The essay will culminate in the examination and in depth discussion of my own original multi-medium composition from within the conceptual framework of the Total Art. The analysis offered and conclusions derived here are not intended to be assertions of objective fact, but rather subjective interpretations informed both by my investigative practices, as well as my own personal artistic aesthetics.

Wagner and the Conceptual Origins of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*

Despite my own experience beginning with a personal, rather than theoretical foundation, an understanding of the conceptual origins of the Total Art, first explicitly articulated by Richard Wagner in 1849, provides an effective framework from within which to conduct my further analysis and composition.

At the core of Wagner's theories resides a highly particular understanding of the nature of art itself. In the opening portions of his essay, *The Art-Work of the Future*, he expounds at great length upon this topic, offering insight into his perspective of art's inherent objectives, as well as its limitations. He writes:

Art [will] not be the thing she can and should be, until she is or can be the true conscious image and exponent of the real Man, and of man's genuine, nature-bidden life; until she therefore need no longer borrow the conditions of her being from the errors, perversities, and unnatural distortions of our modern life... The actual Art Work...is therefore the only true redemption of the artist.²

This excerpt presents two foundational principles of the theory of *Gesamtkunstwerk*: first, that Art springs from man, and through its representative capabilities serves as a means of redemptive reunification between the artist and his inherent nature; secondly, in order for such a reunion to be made possible, the artwork itself must exist as an honest and authentic portrayal of reality.

Wagner's emphasis upon reality within representation is, in many respects, a stumbling block in the process of navigating through his theory, possibly due to its frequent interpretation as an attempt to "pigeonhole" art into the role of simple portraiture. However, I would argue that his claims should not be read as an

² Wagner, 71

implication that all art must stem from, or be directly rooted in fact; such a reading misunderstands the very definition of reality, mistakenly assuming it to be a purely rational and concrete entity. Wagner's understanding, it would appear, depends upon a more nuanced conception of reality as a complex and layered amalgamation of 'rational' perception, 'irrational' emotion, and subconscious observation, the exact nature of which cannot be so simply or literally articulated. As he explains, "Man's nature is twofold, and *outer* and an *inner*,"³ comprised not only of the rational sensory components, but additionally of those more ineffable internal sentiments and sensations.

Artistic endeavors that confine their approach to the direct, literal, and rational are therefore likely to fall short the classification of honest and comprehensive representation of reality. And yet an approach from the other extreme can suffer from similar pitfalls: In an attempt to evade the narrowing scope of purely factual representation, many artists strive for greater breadth of expression, only to stumble into the trap of ambiguity, incomprehensibility, and alienation of their audience. Despite a conscious desire to resist limitations upon their representation, such artists suffer by product of their works unrelatability.

How then does one achieve honest and comprehensive representation? In addressing this notion, we must recognize the inescapable truth that a representation, by definition, can never hope to fully encompass reality. As Wagner eloquently articulates, "Straying far away from the necessity of nature, Mind willfully—and even in the so-called 'common' life, involuntarily—exercises its disfiguring influence

³ Wagner, 91

upon the matter and the form of life,”⁴ indicating the manner by which our initial perception and subsequent process of recreation inevitably distorts reality. A standard of perfection here inherently defies the nature of representation itself, and should be considered more of an abstract objective than a literally attainable goal.

By Wagner’s understanding, we further distance ourselves from our source material when we confine our methods of representation to a limited scope. Here we arrive at yet another conceptual foundation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* theory: all artistic mediums possess inherent limitations upon their expressive capabilities. The composer spends a significant portion of *The Art-Work of the Future* expanding upon this notion, beginning as he so often does from the most foundational of places: the very nature of man. With regards to both the structural limitations and capabilities of humanity, he writes, “Each separate faculty of man is limited by bounds; but his united, agreed, and reciprocally helping faculties...combine to form the self-completing, unbounded, universal faculty of men.”⁵ Only through a collaborative implementation of disparate faculties is man capable of accomplishing his desired and necessary ends. It would be preposterous, for example, to assert that one’s sense of smell, alone, afforded a comprehensive ability of perception. As Wagner further articulates, in even more absolute terms, “nothing in Nature is self-dependent.”⁶

In his understanding, as the nature of art should be grounded in the nature of man, it logically follows that the limitations ascribed to the arts must similarly emulate those afflicting their creator. Therefore, one cannot expect a single branch of the arts to, of its own accord, accomplish the redemptive goal of the artistic process at

⁴ Wagner, 86

⁵ Wagner, 97

⁶ Wagner, 98

large. By contextualizing this conception of collaborative human faculty within the framework of his greater artistic theory, Wagner presents a conception of Art as a grand collective body made up of interactive, dialogic, quasi-familial relationships between specified artistic mediums, the three most prominent of which he recognizes to be Dance, Music (in his words, Tone), and Poetry. He explains:

The arts of Dance, of Tone, and Poetry: thus call themselves the three primeval sisters whom we see at once entwine their measures wherever the conditions necessary for artistic manifestation have arisen. By their nature they are inseparable without disbanding the stately minuet of Art...they are so wondrous closely interlaced with one another, of fairest love and inclination, so mutually bound up in each other's life, of body and of spirit: that each of the three partners, unlinked from the united chain and bereft thus of her own life and motion, can only carry on an artificially inbreathed and borrowed life.⁷

Examined within the context of his prioritization of comprehensive authenticity, the prospect of such a synthetic existence in the absence of unity cannot possibly satisfy the definition of true redemptive artwork.

Wagner moves from the recognition of this overarching bond between the arts to examine the specific manner in which each of the Primeval Sisters falls short in its independent expressive capabilities. Though the art of Dance plays a significant role in his discussion here, for the sake of maintaining focus on the two mediums most pertinent to my own work and analysis, I will limit further investigation to the subject of Tone and Poetry. While such an approach certainly contradicts Wagner's notion of the inseparable nature of these art forms, my objective here is to use his theory as a launching point for my own work, rather than to strictly adhere to its precepts above all else.

⁷ Wagner, 95

As conceived by Wagner, the distinction between the mediums of Tone and Poetry is not so much as an imbalance in expressive capability, but rather a difference in the brand of expression made possible. On the one hand, Tone affords an artist the ability to convey an expansive and complex swath of emotion in a widely accessible manner, open to varying degrees of audience interpretation by virtue of its inherent ambiguities. However, the detrimental bi-product of this broad accessibility is a limitation upon the ability of music to explicitly convey a literal and direct sentiment in a precise manner. As Wagner explains, “For the more vague and general feeling the immediate attributes of Tone sufficed...but the *definite* need which seeks by Speech to gain an understanding is more decided and more pressing.”⁸

Poetry, the most direct artistic manifestation of speech, relies upon the use of a commonly held language as a means of more explicit, articulate, and universally comprehensible representation. However, just as Tone’s broad, interpretative accessibility comes at a cost, so does Poetry suffer from its explicit nature; most notably in its ability to address subjects of a more complex, fluid, or ambiguous characteristic. For example, while a poem can certainly articulate the rational factors contributing to one artist’s depression, it lacks the ability of Music to manifest the sensation of that sadness in a tangible and accessible form. Wagner eloquently articulates this reciprocal relationship, explaining “If Tone obtains from Poetry her pregnant coil of sharp-cut Words...and takes it as a solid mesh of thought wherewith to find her boundless fluid mass of sound: so does she hand her sister back this ideal coil of yearning syllables, that indirectly shadow forth in images, but cannot yet express their thought with all the truth and cogence of necessity-- and hands it as the

⁸ Wagner, 92

direct utterance of Feeling...”⁹ In the simplest terms, Music, no matter how evocative, will always lack the explicit quality of Speech and Poetry, which in turn often require the sacrifice of broader, more complex and nuanced themes in service of precision and clarity.

As artists, if our ultimate objective is truth in representation, we cannot be satisfied with an incomplete method of expression. Therefore, Wagner explains, the solution is simple (at least conceptually so): A reunification of forms. Through the use of multiple mediums, deliberately and carefully deployed and interwoven, we are able to benefit from the most valuable attributes of each artistic component, while simultaneously ‘filling in the gaps’ where their capabilities are most lacking. Wagner most explicitly articulates his vision as “The great United Art-Work, which must gather up each branch of art to use it as a mean, and in some sense to undo it for the common aim of *all*, for the unconditioned, absolute portrayal of perfected human nature.”¹⁰ Only through such a collaborative approach can we hope to produce a comprehensively expressive and honest final product

⁹ Wagner, 111

¹⁰ Wagner, 88

Contemporary Interpretation and Critique

The foundational sentiment articulated by Wagner of a familial relationship between, and desire for reunification of disparate art forms has been echoed by a number of contemporary theorists and artists, both explicitly and implicitly. World-renowned poet Amiri Baraka, known for his extensive work with musicians, as well as his topical fixation with jazz in his textual work, has spoken at great length throughout his career on the notion of an inextricable union between the mediums of music and poetry. In an article for the *Hard Bop Jazz Journal* entitled, “Amiri Baraka on ‘New Music-New Poetry’,” Baraka writes, “Poetry, 1st of all, was and still must be, a musical form. It is speech musicked. It, to be most powerful, must reach to where speech begins, as sound, and bring the sound into full focus and highly rhythmic communication.”¹¹ For him, the deliberately rhythmic construction of text, when spoken aloud, becomes a kind of musical entity, albeit one with highly specified textural capabilities. If considered to be such, then the border between these two forms blurs to an almost indistinguishable point. In further support of this unity between forms, he explains in the same article:

It never occurred to me that there would be any reason not to read poetry with music. And the clearer I got my own legitimate historical and cultural sources, the more obvious it became that not only was the poetry supposed to be as musical as it could be, but that reading with music would only enhance and extend its meaning and give new strength to its form.¹²

¹¹ Baraka, <hardbopjazzjournal.wordpress.net>

¹² Baraka

Such an understanding of the benefits of collaboration between these two mediums clearly aligns with Wagner's assertions of greater expressive capabilities through a unification of the arts.

Baraka is joined in his support for multi-medium composition, as well as his understanding of the familial relationship between music and poetry, by fellow award-winning poet, playwright, and educator Yusef Komunyakaa, whose similar involvement and collaboration with musical artists has earned him the nominal categorization of "Jazz Poet." In the introduction to a collection of interviews with Komunyakaa, editor Shirley James Hanshaw explains the poet's foundational understanding of the relationship between music and poetry, as well as the expressive possibilities of their collaboration, writing:

...He says that language is "our first music," with the body as an amplifier...Consequently, when poetry embraces sounds made by instruments, the two shouldn't collide; they should work together to produce "a whole sound" that is not harmonious but rather "a lyrical discord that creates tension and thought" about life and its implications.¹³

Here, Komunyakaa's encouragement of multi-medium collaboration appear to align with both Baraka's assertions, as well as Wagner's theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, while more specifically delving into the methodology of their interactions (a topic to be investigated at length later in this paper).

Despite emphatic support from the aforementioned artists, the notion of unity between artistic branches has proven to be a point of contention for many, with numerous theorists offering potent critiques of the theory of a "Total Art." Perhaps the most frequent criticism is that, in the process of prioritizing a greater artistic

¹³ Komunyakaa, xv

product, Wagner encourages a disregard for each independent component of the greater whole, ironically compromising the integrity of the composition at large. In his essay *Die Fabrikation det Fiktionen*, Carl Einstein expounds upon this prospective danger, explaining that Wagner’s proposed goal of “utopian potential threatens to disperse in to vague and latently aggressive concepts of totality that are directed against subjectivist positions. If art is elevated to a ‘remedy,’ the interest in the individual work and its specific poeticism—which should define the work—necessarily dwindles.”¹⁴

Additional critique stems from the writings of German essayist Thomas Mann, who more directly asserts that the inherent flaw in Wagner’s proposed approach to art is that it encourages abbreviation and superficial dabbling, rather than in-depth participation within a given medium. He more directly describes this practice as “dilettantism to the n-th power.”¹⁵ Contemporary Architect Michael Vitalis echoes this notion, asserting such an artistic practice to be driven by a “nineteenth century cult of grandeur” mentality, prioritizing “size for size’s sake,” though ultimately lacking in substance. He further questions “whether the totality – of a total work of art – can really be conceived, or even captured. And if it can, does its pragmatic existence deny its transcendental existence?”¹⁶

Political and artistic theorist Theodor Adorno takes these criticisms one step further, offering a pessimistic take on Wagner’s most foundational theories; more specifically, his conception of the familial and interconnected nature of the arts.

¹⁴ Finger, 13

¹⁵ Vidalis, <greekarchitects.net>

¹⁶ Vidalis

Adorno vehemently asserts that any attempts to force a unification of disparate art forms contradicts what he believes to be their inherently distinct nature, and as such compromises the greater artistic endeavor. “The whole no longer achieves unity,” he explains, “because its expressive elements are made to harmonize with each other according to a pre-arranged design, possibly of a conventional nature. Instead, the different arts which are now alienated from each other cannot be reconciled by any meaning, are yoke together at the arbitrary fiat of the isolated artist.”¹⁷ By Adorno’s understanding, if the ultimate goal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is to more accurately and comprehensively represent reality through the collaboration of forms, then a contrived or artificially manipulated approach to such collaboration could not possibly hope to achieve an honest result.

To a certain degree, critiques of this nature are at their core a matter of aesthetic preference: if one prioritizes the purity of each individual art, this will likely lead them to resist any practice that seems to compromise or infringe upon such independence. From such a vantage point, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as well as Wagner’s ambitious conception of a familial relationship between the arts at large, represents an attack upon the sovereignty of each distinct medium, and furthermore a misguided attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. The impossibility of such an endeavor can only lead to the further corruption and manipulation of the arts in an unnatural attempt to achieve an unattainable state of harmonious unity.

It is hard to deny a degree of validity to this general criticism; Wagner’s optimistic take on the inevitable compatibility of all artistic mediums glazes over the

¹⁷ Follet, 91

difficulty involved in the process of merging art forms that inherently prioritize and require different things. For example, speech, and more specifically poetry, necessitates a clarity absent of excessive distraction, as the expressivity of a spoken word performance is dependent almost entirely upon the literal comprehensibility of its content. By contrast, music quite often draws additional power through its layered texture of interactive parts, allowing for the representation or embodiment of a broad swath of emotional content, and thus encourages the presence of greater sonic activity within a given performance.

Before I progress further, let me make careful effort to note that the aforementioned examples are not intended to be taken as hard and fast regulations, but rather general characteristics of each medium, subject to change dependent upon the specific interests at play in any given artistic endeavor. That being said, we must recognize that in the instance of joining these two artistic mediums, there may likely be moments at which the interests of each will run counter to one another, a pitfall that can either reduce the overall clarity of the composition, or by contrast, encourage the composer to short-change the greater expressive capabilities of each medium through manipulation and abbreviation, in service of smoother cooperation.

While I do not believe such resistance to unification inherently compromises the conception of the arts as interconnected, it is fair to suggest that Wagner's conceptualization of their relationship may overextend in its optimism. A number of contemporary theorists have therefore offered up novel interpretations of the theory of Total Art, in an effort to accommodate and respond to a more pragmatic perspective.

In his essay, “Variations on Totality,” Oliver Schefer delves into the very literal meaning behind the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in an effort to further enlighten its true nature, and the relationship between those individual artistic components involved. He writes:

“What is ‘total’ in the German expression *Gesamtkunstwerk* is precisely the gathering, the collection of different parts, and therefore the transgression of boundaries: *gesamt* is a past participle used as an adjective, derived from the archaic verb *samen*, which means ‘to assemble, gather, collect.’¹⁸

In many ways, such an understanding appears contrary to Wagner’s own notion of the arts as inextricably intertwined, and simply reunited through the gathering process of Total Art composition. Schefer does not ascribe to this notion of a pre-existing connection; such a claim carries with it the implicit understanding that once attempts at a fusion of forms is made, unity is inevitable. Instead, he offers a more practical understanding, explaining: “The unity of two contrary terms, their synthesis, is not a sum of their qualities and their respective differences. Rather than a synthesis, this sum is an aggregate, a simple addition problem, chaotic and confused. Unity only truly happens with the emergence of an *identity*.”¹⁹ Here, the collaborative process is viewed less as a reunion, and more as a merging in service of further creation.

Through his novel interpretation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Schefer offers a unique take on very nature of unity, and the way by which we conceive of the relationship between whole and its composite elements. His so called “Theory of Fragments” asserts that, contrary to Wagner’s assertion of a pre-existing unity that has since been shattered and begs for reassembled, it is the fusion of disparate entities

¹⁸ Follett, 5

¹⁹ Schefer, 41

that gives rise to such a new entity, greater than the sum of its parts. While such a union is not preordained or inevitable, neither is it a completely unnatural or implausible objective, as suggested by many of Wagner's critiques.

Personally, I have found this understanding to be dramatically resonant with my own artistic aesthetics; Such a conceptualization of the relationship between the arts simultaneously takes into account the inherent incompatibilities or points of resistance between different mediums, while maintaining a consideration for the possibility and benefit of collaborative composition. Such a pragmatic take on Wagner's foundational theories serves as a bridge between the abstract ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and its practical application.

The Methodology of Gesamtkunstwerk Composition

Having addressed both the plausibility and the inherent difficulty of multi-medium composition, we turn now to the question of methodology: How does one approach the practice of Total Art in a manner that successfully achieves an expressive and honestly representative end product, while avoiding the possible pitfalls of the collaborative process? I have found, through my own compositional and analytical work, that before delving into the practicalities, the process begins with a deliberate consideration of intention; in order for a multi-medium composition to thrive, the first task is to ensure compatibility of objectives between its disparate components, in service of the greater whole. Here, the terms “objective” and “intention” refer to the intended expressive effects of these components, be they the expansive transmissions of emotional content, the more highly specified attempts to convey a tangible message, or anything in between.

Such a process is not so direct as it may initially sound. It would be an oversimplification, for example, to suggest that all thematically similar components are well suited to merge: shared subject matter does not guarantee a shared perspective; nor does it ensure that the emotional content expressed by each component is compatible, or that the individual parts of the whole do not contradict or undermine one another during the course of their interaction. By virtue of the complex nature of the human experience, hinted at by Wagner in *The Art-Work of the Future*, there exist a near-infinite number of possible interpretations of and perspectives on any given topic or event, defined by a near-infinite collection of

rational and irrational experiential factors. Simply put, a shared topic does not equate a shared objective.

However, we should neither assume that disparate intention automatically disqualifies two artistic components from merging effectively. On the contrary, in order to craft a nuanced, fluid, and more comprehensive final product, it is essential that the artist work to represent the multi-faceted nature of human experience, which includes a constant shifting and balancing of objectives. The necessity here is to ensure that this balancing act is maintained in service of the overall goal of the composition, rather than dissolving into a chaotic mess of competing interests; the essential distinction must therefore be made between “Collaborative” and “Competitive” intentions.

In actuality, such an understanding is little more than an extension of the Theory of Fragments, (specifically, the conceptualization of “the whole” as a collection of disparate, yet inextricably intertwined elements) coupled with Wagner’s understanding of the capabilities and limitations of each artistic medium and their inherent potential for collaboration. One can conceive of the intention driving an effective total art composition as a product of distinct, yet tightly interwoven and collaborative objectives, addressed by those mediums best suited to accomplish them. As articulated by Wagner, and previously discussed in this essay, Music, most notably adept in its broad expressive capabilities, can be best applied in service of an attempt at more general emotional transference, or for the purposes of thematic or emotional contextualization. Text and Poetry, by contrast, are most effectively

employed in service of more direct and literal attempts at conveying narrative, description, or a tangible message in a comprehensible fashion.

Conflict arises when these individual objectives do not align: for example, if the emotional context established by the music contradicts the narrative delivered by the text, the discrepancy will be apparent, and will likely undermine the effectiveness of the composition (unless of course such tension is deliberate). Baraka articulates the tangible consequences of such an unintentional inconsistency, explaining:

Sometimes working with the other, less skilled musicians trying to put poetry with music is hard draggy work. The musicians might not want to deal with poetry, might not be able to understand that for the music to be right it must begin with the spirit of the poem and put into sound.²⁰

Though his concern here is one-sided, focused upon hypothetical deficiencies on the musical end of the spectrum, such a scenario is equally conceivable if the poet disregards the emotional content of his or her accompanying score; either would result in a highly detrimental compositional inconsistency that would compromise the expressive capabilities of the greater artistic project.

In an interview with E. Ethelbert Miller and Zoe Anglesey, Komunyakaa offers a telling piece of advice for any collaborative efforts between the mediums of music and poetry, in an effort to avoid the unfortunate scenario foretold by Baraka. He explains, “There has to be mutual respect—the poet has to respect both the music and the musicians. In turn, musicians—by their listening and playing—must show respect for the poet’s words. Then there has to be a working out of things: space has to be provided for both the music and the poem.”²¹ Such an understanding is strikingly reminiscent of Wagner’s own writings on the subject, specifically his notion that only

²⁰ Baraka

²¹ Komunyakaa, 104

collaborative coexistence can facilitate a cohesive, honest, and effective artistic endeavor; it similarly demonstrates an awareness of the pitfalls of abbreviation and superficial, unbalanced collaboration criticized by Adorno, Mann, and Vitalis, while maintaining a notably optimistic outlook on the possibility of successful cooperation.

In conjunction with those more abstract and conceptual efforts towards balanced collaboration, tangible sacrifices within each individual medium must be made in service of the greater whole if successful composition is to be expected. Music intended for performance in conjunction with speech must be careful to not texturally overcrowd the composition, as too thick a density will leave no room for the poet's voice to offer greater clarity and precision to the raw emotional backdrop. Similarly, the poet must willingly work his voice into the greater textural structure of the larger composition, accepting that while this may lessen the degree to which the audience can focus exclusively upon the explicit textual content, the additional layers of harmony, melody, and rhythm will offer a greater emotional depth to the text itself. Furthermore, the rhythmic and tonal nature of each medium must be deliberately formatted, modulated and attenuated in order to ensure that their interaction remains harmonious, or rather, that it allows both to accomplish their individual and unified objectives in a manner consistent with the expressive desires of the composer.

If the composer is willing and able to maintain a prioritization of the composition at large over its individual components, and makes careful effort to allow each to fulfill those expressive tasks best suited to its natural tendencies, his final product will achieve a degree of depth and substance unattainable for a single-medium composition. It is certainly a difficult task, despite Wagner's initial

optimism, and a perfect degree of cohesion may, as some suggest, be a literal impossibility; but perhaps there is reward in the struggle itself.

Jurgen Soring, employing quotations by Jaques Lacan, asserts a notion to such effect from within the theoretical framework of Wagner's understanding of art as, above all else, a method of reflection upon the humanity of the artist. Rather than refuting the impossibility of total reconciliation between forms, Soring explains that it is the unsatisfied desire for an impossible state of completion that defines humanity, and consequently, humanities artistic endeavors. He writes:

“In the unappeasable ‘yearning for the whole’ ‘one will recognize the yearnings of humanity: metaphysical fata morgana of universal harmony; mystic abyss if affective unity, social utopia of a totalitarian paternalism, all forms of nostalgia and homesickness, after a paradise lost before birth and the darkest striving toward death.’”²²

For Soring and Lacan, even in the midst of its significant limitations, the practice of *Gesamtkunstwerk* is paradoxically successful in its attempts to reflect reality by tangibly enacting its inherent inability to ever truly accomplish such a goal; Human nature is rife with contradiction, and thus, art must be as well.

Beyond the necessity for deliberate and careful cooperation on the conceptual and practical level, there does not appear to be a hard and fast proscription for a singular compositional process within the field of Total Art; nor do we see any such mandate with specific regard to those compositions involving music and poetry. As can be said of most artistic practices, methodology and approach is a highly individualized practice. However, through my investigation, I have found that it is possible to condense these personalized approaches into three generalized categories.

²² Soring, 75

Musician, spoken word artist and educator Adam Falkner describes his own process as, in a sense, “score-first,” initially relying upon portions of music as the impotence and inspiration for his textual composition. He explains

Every writer has a music or a soundtrack to the way they write that is in their head, the way they wrap their mouths around language and words, and the way they format the rhythm and the pentameter of their words. And for me, forever, that’s been hip hop and its been jazz, but lately I’ve been listening to a ton of blue grass...every time I need a new poem idea, or I have something mulling around in my head and I want it to come with me, I’ll just find a steel guitar...²³

In this instance, music serves as the source of initial inspiration for the creative process, evoking a broader emotional content that is then further refined and directed through the textual portion of the composition.

Composer TJ Anderson, a frequent collaborator of Komunyakaa, employs something of a contrasting, “text-first” methodology, which relies upon the inherent musicality of the poet’s language to guide the rhythmic and melodic direction of the piece as a whole. In an interview with Trudier Harris, Jerry W. Ward, and Komunyakaa, he speaks on his work with Komunyakaa, explaining, “the music fits the written word...if his poetry didn’t sing to me, I could never use him...I mean, there are certain poets who just sing to my ear; when I read them, I hear the music. That’s what the connection *is*.”²⁴

Komunyakaa himself asserts a personal process that seems to exist between the two aforementioned extremes, one in which composition is fairly simultaneous and interactive. With regards to his collaborative project with Anderson, he describes the writing process as, “a kind of trading notes in a way, because I’m writing a

²³ Adam 3, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ni-4ViII0Cs>>.

²⁴ Komunyakaa, 151

narrative that's flexible in a sense, and I think T. J. is writing a parallel narrative that dovetails with mine...”²⁵ It is a process in which “two things form a third, and that third thing that emerges is filled with surprises.”²⁶ Constant dialogue between mediums governs the creative process here, often lending itself to a notably egalitarian, balanced final product with regards to the representation of each component.

As is true with nearly all brands of artistic expression, the particular compositional approach to any given project within the field of Total Art will be governed in large part by the personal preferences and aesthetics of the involved parties; while the previous examples may serve as templates for much contemporary practice, they should not be taken as absolute proscriptions. Attempts to ascribe a singular methodology to methods of artistic expression are inherently misguided, and only serve to pigeonhole the creative process at large. However, what we can draw from the aforementioned investigation is an understanding of the necessary conceptual and practical considerations unique to the field of multi-medium composition.

²⁵ Komunyakaa, 151

²⁶ Komunyakaa, 151

Practical Application and Analysis

In the final section of this paper, I will engage in an analytical discussion of my own collaborative composition involving music and poetry, entitled “The Ostrich.” Initially conceived of as the final movement of a larger Total Art composition, this piece was largely informed by my personal interpretation of the theoretical framework articulated throughout this essay. The following analysis is intended to serve as a more direct means of engagement with the practical application of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* theory. For the sake of maintaining a distinction between myself as the composer and my character within the narrative of the poem, I will from herein refer to the latter as “the narrator.” The textual portion of the composition can be found below:

The Ostrich

So, the other night, i'm dreaming. and you're there. but it's less like *you* and *i*, and more like *we*, y'know? so *we* are there...and we are an ostrich. and i know that sounds crazy...it probably is...but, at the end of the day, its my dream, so we are there, and we are an ostrich. and we're inside this big vaulted cathedral, and i know that it would be beautiful— but it is pouring. and i don't know how the rain's getting in, whether there's some a structural integrity issue or just some kind of *dream magic*, but in the moment, none of that is really important, because it's incredibly cold, and wet, and just generally pretty awful. so we start running back and forth, because i'm worried that leaving might mean loosing this whole *we* thing that i'm pretty fond of, but maybe just moving around will help distract us, right? so, were doing these sorta' gangly ostrich sprints back and forth across the hall, and around the pews, and all of a sudden, out of the rain struts my old professor. and he's an ostrich too. and he starts recycling some old lecture about “the theory of diminishing returns,” but he's saying it all backwards, so its really “returns diminishing of theory the,” and i can barely make out the words he's saying, let alone their point, so i start to stress that wont be ready for the midterm coming up (which is not a real midterm, it's a dream midterm, so its not actually important, but in the moment, i'm absolutely terrified), so i start to say something to the effect of: “hey! stop

talking backwards, you're being a really inconsiderate teacher right now," but before i get the chance, the rain comes on even harder, and swallows up the whole cathedral. so we're sinking under the water, and i start to panic even more, because i've never been a very good swimmer, but then all of a sudden we're become a fish. and we've a pair of gills, like a fish, and we're breathing together. except, when your part of one body you don't *breath together* you just *breathe*, so we breathe, and we swim, and we breathe, and we swim, and finally and you say something about how all of this would be so much better if we could always be this close. and i tell you that's not how it usually works with me, you've gotta lower your expectations. so you ask me if i will miss you when you're gone.

And then I wake up. And you aren't there. And like that, I forget everything. And the bitch of it is, you can never forget that you've forgotten something, right? that shit will stick with you. But for the life of me, I couldn't tell you what it is I can't remember...I know that I sound crazy. I probably am. All that I am trying to say is:

The theory of diminishing returns holds that over time, humans will adjust their expectations to accommodate any changes in circumstance. When the metaphorical bar is raised, anything beneath it becomes insignificant; a body that has been a part of another body will never be comfortable with an otherwise perfectly adequate life alone, which is to say—I miss you. Even when you're still around.

As with many of my compositions, "The Ostrich" emerged from a personal struggle to honestly and adequately convey the sentiment of loss I experienced in the wake of a recent relationship's dissolution. I had found that in previous compositional attempts, my preoccupation with articulating a narrative distracted from my ability to earnestly investigate and evoke the complex emotional nature of the events themselves; as forewarned by Wagner in his earliest writings on the subject, the factual grounding of the narrative effectively limited my freedom to express the multi-faceted, and at times irrational emotional experience that defined the relationship in question. Furthermore, I discovered that any reliance upon strict narrative construction or highly poeticized dialect only served to distance my art from the source of this emotional content, acting as something of a buffer between the things I meant to say, and the people I wanted to say them to.

In an effort to address both of these concerns, I composed a rough version of what would later become the textual component of “The Ostrich”; a highly colloquial prose poem detailing a surreal dream experience that served as a metaphor for the dissolution of the relationship, allowing me to focus my creative investigation on the underlying emotional content rather than the rational facts of the narrative. While this initial attempt was successful in avoiding the aforementioned pitfalls, it simultaneously added a degree of inaccessibility to the composition, limiting its capability for emotional transference to anyone unfamiliar with story lurking behind the scenes. It was here that I began to investigate the possibility of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach, drawing upon the distinctly broad and elaborate expressive capabilities of a multi-medium composition as a means for addressing and evoking the desired emotional sentiments without the need for over-articulation. The addition of a musical component, coupled with necessary textual revision in service of collaboration, would ideally facilitate a more honest investigation of the emotional complexities that defined the subject matter inspiring my work.

When entering into the collaborative compositional process, my objective was not to create a perfect synchronicity between the poem and its score; such a deliberate unity could easily be interpreted as contrived, and counter to the colloquial intentions of the greater composition. As had become clear throughout my previous investigation, a successful *Gesamtkunstwerk* was not simply the merging of disparate mediums at a point of topical convergence, but rather a collaborative dialogue between disparate foundational elements, allowing for each to both be showcased, and to support its partner component. Thus, throughout my compositional process, I

worked to construct something of a rhythmic and thematic counterpoint between the two components, in an effort to facilitate the kind of complex yet cohesive expressivity promoted by Wagner and his contemporary theorists.

Let us first focus upon the textual component of this composition: In an attempt to distance myself from those limiting narrative tendencies that had previously disrupted my efforts, I chose instead to rely upon thematic and imagistic expansion and contraction for the purposes of compositional development. From a poetic perspective, I conceived of the piece as a sequence of three distinct scenes, delineated by stanza-breaks within the text. Each of these sequences each would begin with a focused starting point from which to rapidly expand outward, in both an imagistic and emotive sense. The first of these scenes takes place within the dreamscape, beginning with a simple, if not fanciful image of an ostrich; or rather, the narrator and his companion re-imagined in the body of an ostrich. From this initial moment, the scene enlarges to encompass additional details of the surrounding environment and characters. While each detail carries a varying degree of personal significance the ultimate objective of each is to work together to craft an expansive scene rife with layers of absurdity (e.g. an indoor rainstorms, academic lectures delivered backwards, humans in ostrich forms, etc), as well as more direct emotive significance (the feeling of closeness between two lovers, the sentiment of uncomfortably within ones surroundings, or the fear of literally being swallowed up by your environment). Though never directly addressing the significance behind these layers of emotional content and images, they serve as the foundation for the poems later introspective attempts.

The second sequence describes the process of waking up from the dream, and the struggle to remember a world that had only moments before been vivid and tangible. Similar to stanza one, this sequence gradually expands to address the complex emotions that accompany the loss of something ineffable. This sentiment, though intended as a metaphor for the struggle to regain one's sense of self in the wake of a relationship's dissolution, deliberately stops short of addressing such a topic directly. Instead, it foreshadows more vulnerable moments to come, while serving as a bridge between the surrealism of the dream, and the lonely reality that exists in its aftermath.

The third and final scene serves as a moment of verbal introspection and confession, expanding outward from a simple definition of "the Theory of Diminishing Returns" to address the larger issues at play throughout the composition. This is a culminating moment in the piece, as it is the first time the narrator explicitly addresses his former relationship, as well as the first explicit reveal of his emotional standpoint in reference to the narrative. The withholding of such evocative details until the final seconds of the composition is a dangerous practice, and risks alienating the audience, or losing them to a sentiment of disinterest if not emotionally engaged on some other front.

And thus we arrive at the musical component of the piece. My primary objective from a musical perspective was to design a thematic backdrop that would augment (though not directly mirror) the imagistic and emotional expansion of the text, while additionally guiding the greater emotional trajectory of the piece. I chose to begin with a simple yet flexible piano ostinato: a Dadd9(no 3) chord, voiced high

and wide in the piano register and played in a set rhythmically fluctuating septuplets.²⁷ This theme intended to highlight both the fluidity of the dreamscape, by virtue of its rhythmic instability, as well as the initial ambiguity of emotional content, by virtue of its open nature and deliberate avoidance of defining chord tones, all while leaving textural room for the narrator to expound upon his story. From this initial state, I moved to expand outward in both texture and harmony, at first adding a simple *D-C#-A* progression in the bass, and subsequently embellishing upon the second two chords with additional tonal clusters.²⁸ The *D* continues to serve as a pedal tone throughout, maintaining a grounding within the overarching textual scene; meanwhile, each tonal cluster cut through the ostinato to accentuate every image appearing within the constantly shifting dreamscape, and furthermore to physically embody the accompanying sentiment of surprising discovery. The increasing density of these tonal clusters further elaborated upon the textural background to craft an even more complex soundscape, while maintain a prioritization of the poet as the “lead-instrument” of sorts.

In terms of more direct emotional manipulation, the harmony of the composition overall serves to imitate and accentuate the emotive balancing act contained within the text. While the aforementioned textual construction of the poem breaks down into three separate sections, the musical construction separates the composition into four distinct groupings (creatively titled “A,” “B,” “C,” and “D”) based upon their more nuanced emotional content.²⁹ The initial dream sequence is broken into two distinct, alternating segments: The first emphasizes the fanciful,

²⁷ See Appendix A, Section “Introduction” for transcription.

²⁸ See Appendix A, Section “A (1)” for transcription

²⁹ See Appendix B for textual breakdown by harmonic grouping

imaginative, and at times humorous nature of the scene, while similarly highlighting the subtle sense of nostalgia present throughout. The harmony of this section, (“A,” in the score) works to match such a sentiment, maintaining a predominately major tonality, while employing dissonance within the tone clusters to indicate the pervading bittersweet nature of the moment.³⁰ However, at the first moment of tangible distress within the text, when the narrator references his attempts to escape from the downpour within the church, the harmonic quality shifts abruptly to minor, signaling the “B” section of the score. Here, a *Bmin7/F#* and subsequent harmonic walk-down³¹ is employed in a deliberate attempt to accentuate the transition from fanciful imagination to signs of trouble to come.

The harmonic patterns of the “A” and “B” sections alternate three times before the text of the dream sequence comes to close. The last of the “B” sections, occurring at the poem’s first dynamic peak, transitions into a return to the initial bare-bones piano ostinato, though rhythmically re-imagined with a more driving, dotted sixteenth pattern (section “C”).³² The abrupt removal of all textural embellishments embodies the dramatic textual shrinkage of imagistic scope, and serves to focus the audience’s attention on the intimacy of the moment. As the text explains the narrator’s struggle to regain his footing as he awakens, the piano pattern gradually descends into a lower register, deliberately mirroring the return to a more stable and grounded reality in the wake of an all too tangible dream. Similarly, the establishment of a steady rhythmic pulse (which has until now been notably absent, or rather, fluid in nature) further grounds this moment within the context of reality. The narrator

³⁰ See Appendix A, section A for notation

³¹ See Appendix A, section B for notation

³² See Appendix A, Section C for notation, Appendix B for textual breakdown.

becomes more hesitant in his speech, in an effort indicate a lingering sense of confusion, and an inability to fully shake the emotional sentiment of the dream, as well as to provide textural room within which the driving rhythm of the piano can push forward towards its climax.

Just as we finally arrive at the narrator's moment of recognition and confession of his true feelings on the relationship, a topic only hinted at until now, a new progression enters under the piano ostinato;³³ The cyclical nature of this six-bar phrase (section "D"),³⁴ coupled with its emphasis of the *B-minor* harmony within the context of a predominantly major tonality, serves to tangibly convey the inescapable sentiment of nostalgia most explicitly articulated in the final lines of the poem. Simultaneously, the steady build in rhythmic drive and textural density accompanies and accentuates the gradual increase in textual intensity, effectively driving the composition to its ultimate climax.

This layered compositional construction, simultaneously dividing the piece into segments based upon thematic/imagistic content, as well as emotional substance, afforded me the ability to more directly manage the sense of momentum and tension throughout the composition. At moments when the emotional emphasis asserted by the score aligned with the language and literal message of the poem, the composition as a whole was driven forwards, bolstered by a very tangible sense of unity; this most notably occurs during the "A" sections of the piece, as well as in the final "D" section. However, at times when the emotional themes asserted by the music contradicted the content of the text, the composition as a whole grew increasingly

³³ See Appendix B

³⁴ See Appendix A, section D for notation

tense, even in the midst of an otherwise textually unassuming passage.³⁵ This most notably occurs during the “B” sections of the composition.

Direct control over the emotional expressivity of the piece at large, to such a specified degree, would simply not have been possible without the simultaneous use of two distinct artistic mediums; and while I would not be so presumptuous as to assume or purport the overall effectiveness of my own work, I would say that by implementing the theories of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in service of my compositional efforts, I found my goal of honest and expansive expression to be far more attainable than it had appeared in past experience. Furthermore, such an approach afforded me the ability to engage my emotional and narrative source material in a more nuanced fashion, from a variety of perspectives that I had previously found incompatible. Thus, I would consider the experience overall to have been incredibly successful and rewarding.

³⁵ See Appendix B, Sections B (1) – B (3)

Conclusion

Ideologically speaking, I fundamentally struggle with claims of supremacy amongst disparate methods of artistic expression; so much is based upon the personal aesthetics of the artist, their ultimate intention, and the context within which they are creating, that the determination of an absolute ideal is, in my own opinion, an impossibility. Therefore, I find Wagner's claims of the necessity of a unified approach to artistic endeavors, and of the preeminence of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a means of creative expression are inherently problematic. However, from a personal perspective, as an artist constantly searching for those methods best suited to articulate the sentiments I wish to convey, in the manner I wish to convey them, I can say without hesitation that the theoretical framework of the Total-Art offers a means of emotional expressivity that is unparalleled in its depth, breadth, and nuance.

Such expression is difficult to achieve, and one must take a careful and deliberate approach in order to evade the numerous pitfalls that accompany this more complex artistic process. Despite the assertions of Wagner and his disciples, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is not a perfect method of artistic expression; but its benefits make the effort well worth it.

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Appendix A:

The Ostrich

Introduction:

Should Be Played With Loose Rhythmic Feel, Picking Up Speed Over Course Of The Measure

8va (until otherwise noted)

Piano

Pno.

A (1):
DMaj7

Pno.

Pno.

Pno.

9

Pno.

11

Pno.

13

Pno.

Dmaj7sus4

15

Pno.

DMaj7

17

Pno.

19

Pno.

21

Pno.

23

Pno.

25

Pno.

Dmaj7sus4

27

B (1):

Bm7/F# AMaj9

Pno.

GMaj9

Pno.

A (2 + 3):
DMaj7

Pno.

Pno.

Pno.

Pno.

39

Pno.

41

Pno.

Dmaj7sus4

43

Pno.

B (2 + 3):
Bm7/F#

AMaj9

45

Pno.

GMaj9

GMaj9

47

Bm7/F# AMaj9

Pno.

49

GMaj9 GMaj9

Pno.

51

C: Solid Beat/Strict Rime Established

Pno.

53

Pno.

55

Pno.

56

Pno.

Measures 57-58: Treble clef, G major. Measure 57: Quarter notes G4, B4, D5. Measure 58: Quarter notes G4, B4, D5. Bass clef: whole rests.

Pno.

Measures 59-60: Treble clef, G major. Measure 59: Quarter notes G4, B4, D5. Measure 60: Quarter notes G4, B4, D5. Bass clef: whole rests.

Pno.

Measures 61-62: Treble clef, G major. Measure 61: Quarter notes G4, B4, D5. Measure 62: Quarter notes G4, B4, D5. Bass clef: whole rests.

Pno.

Measures 63-64: Treble clef, G major. Measure 63: Quarter notes G4, B4, D5. Measure 64: Quarter notes G4, B4, D5. Bass clef: whole rests.

No more 8va

Pno.

Measures 65-66: Treble clef, G major. Measure 65: Quarter notes G4, B4, D5. Measure 66: Quarter notes G4, B4, D5. Bass clef: whole rests.

Pno.

64

Pno.

DMaj AMaj

66

Pno.

GMaj9 Bm7

68

Pno.

DMaj/F# GMaj9

70

Pno.

DMaj AMaj

72

GMaj9 Bm7

Pno.

74

DMaj/F# GMaj9

Pno.

76

DMaj AMaj

Pno.

78

GMaj9 Bm7

Pno.

80

DMaj/F# x4

Pno.

82

Appendix B

The Ostrich: (Textual Breakdown By Musical Sections)

Introduction:

So, the other night, i'm dreaming.

A (1):

and you're there. but it's less like *you* and *i*, and more like *we*, y'know? so *we* are there...and we are an ostrich. and i know that sounds crazy...it probably is...but, at the end of the day, its my dream, so we are there, and we are an ostrich. and we're inside this big vaulted cathedral, and i know that it would be beautiful— but it is pouring. and I don't know how the rain's getting in, whether there's some a structural integrity issue or just some kind of *dream magic*, but in the moment, none of that is really important, because it's incredibly cold, and wet, and just generally pretty awful.

B (1):

so we start running back and forth, because i'm worried that leaving might mean loosing this whole *we* thing that i'm pretty fond of, but maybe just moving around will help distract us, right?

A (2):

so, were doing these sorta' gangly ostrich sprints back and forth across the hall, and around the pews, and all of a sudden, out of the rain struts my old professor. and he's an ostrich too. and he starts recycling some old lecture about "the theory of diminishing returns," but he's saying it all backwards, so its really "returns diminishing of theory the," and i can barely make out the words he's saying, let alone their point,

B (2):

so i start to stress that wont be ready for the midterm coming up (which is not a real midterm, it's a dream midterm, so its not actually important, but in the moment, i'm absolutely terrified), so I start to say something to the effect of: "hey! stop talking backwards, you're being a really inconsiderate teacher right now," but before i get the chance, the rain comes on even harder, and swallows up the whole cathedral.

A (3):

so we're sinking under the water, and i start to panic even more, because i've never been a very good swimmer, but then all of a sudden we're become a fish. and we've a pair of gills, like a fish, and we're breathing together. except, when your part of one body you don't *breath together* you just *breathe*, so we breathe, and we swim, and we breathe, and we swim, and finally and you say something about how all of this would be so much better if we could always be this close.

B (3):

and i tell you that's not how it usually works with me, you've gotta lower your expectations. so you ask me if i will miss you when you're gone.

C:

And then I wake up. And you aren't there. And like that, I forget everything. And the bitch of it is, you can never forget that you've forgotten something, right? that shit will stick with you. But for the life of me, I couldn't tell you what it is I can't remember...I know that I sound crazy. I probably am. All that I am trying to say is:

D:

The theory of diminishing returns holds that over time, humans will adjust their expectations to accommodate any changes in circumstance. When the metaphorical bar is raised, anything beneath it becomes insignificant; a body that has been a part of another body will never be comfortable with an otherwise perfectly adequate life alone, which is to say—I miss you. Even when you're still around.