

Chapter V: Operas

In interviews, Widmann often emphasizes that his home turf as a musician is the chamber-music setting. As a composer, he has gradually progressed from works for a few players toward compositions for larger ensembles and ultimately, to orchestral works. Operas have long fascinated him but, in their traditional form, also left him unsatisfied. Yet instead of declaring the genre obsolete, he developed over the years what he calls his own “dream of a different singing and a different acting.”¹ Interestingly, this development unfolded along a thematic thread, a psychological aspect examined from various many sides: “the impossibility of language,”² i.e., the many ways in which interpersonal communication often fails.

Widmann composed *Absences*, his first work in the operatic genre, at age 16 on commission from the Munich Biennale 1990, the first reiteration of the international festival of new opera Hans Werner Henze had initiated in 1988 in Widmann’s city of birth. The work features the everyday interaction among high-school students with its typical linguistic minimalism and emotional reticence. For the Biennale 1994 he composed the one-act opera *Stimmbruch* (Change of voice), which turns around an adolescent’s struggle for identity and his concomitant difficulties in articulating his insecurities. 1996 saw the first performance in Basel of Widmann’s *Knastgesänge* (Jail songs), subtitled “three music-dramatic pieces for puppeteers, singers, and instrumentalists after librettos by Hans-Ulrich Treichel and with variations on songs by Hans Werner Henze.” Each of these pieces portrays the isolation and hopelessness of a man who, owing to an act committed with minimal criminal intention (a theft of food, participation in an insurgency against the menace of foreign rule, and involuntary drug dealing), is taken into custody and thereby loses the freedom of a meaningful exchange with other human beings.

Three times in the course of the years 1998-2000 Widmann ventured into alternative ways of combining music with theater. In 1998, responding

¹Interview with Rainer Karlitschek and Hanspeter Krellmann on occasion of the first performance of the opera *Das Gesicht im Spiegel*, reprinted in the program booklet of the Bavarian State Opera, pp. 32-40 [32].

²Ibid.

to an invitation from stage director Dieter Dorn, he composed incidental music for the performance of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* at the Munich Kammerspiele Theater, thus gathering experience with the impact of sparse musical effects. In his incidental music for the performance of Euripides's tragedy *Hecabe*, written a year later in the same context but for much larger forces including an orchestra and a women's choir, he came closer to an operatic adaptation of literature. Yet another year later he approached what may be regarded as the counterpole of these two attempts when he responded to a commission by the German Pavilion at the World Exposition 2000 with the "instrumental theater" *Die Befreiung aus dem Paradies* (The liberation from paradise). In this improvisation-based work, he translated the exposition motto "Humanity, Nature, Technology" into a reflection on how the paucity of communication brought about by modern media might be overcome by music, above all non-vocal music.

The early years of the new millennium saw Widmann experimenting in his instrumental music with a "new look at earlier compositions."³ Three times in subsequent years he transferred this approach also to his music-dramatic oeuvre. While his orchestral works characteristically embedded extensive self-quotations into a new composition, he created new operatic works from initially self-contained pieces. In 2002, again commissioned by the Munich Biennale, he put together an unusual three-episode piece, linking his "short opera for soprano, actor, Russian cimbalom or dulcimer and percussion" of 1997, *K(l)eine Morgenstern-Szene* (Small/No Scene on Morgenstern), with its counterpart of 2001, *Das Echo* (The Echo), "scene for one actor, female voice, and nine instruments," by way of an instrumental intermezzo, his *Duel* for trombone and electric guitar of 1998. In the larger unit now entitled *Monologues for Two*, his idiosyncratic music-dramatic theme assumes a new facet: communication not only fails but is purposefully refused, either autistically or aggressively.

"Am Anfang" (At the beginning), the music-dramatic work conceived in 2009 in collaboration with Anselm Kiefer for the 20th anniversary of the Opéra Bastille in Paris, is centrally based on Widmann's orchestral composition *Armonica* of 2006. The thematic aspects of this composition—the evocation of a prehistoric time steeped in myths, the recurrent clatter of crumbling buildings erected with excessive human hubris, and the laments of Old-Testament prophets—prefigure central aspects of *Babylon*, his grand opéra of 2012.

³Compare the 59-bar passage from *Lied für Orchester* embedded into *Teufel Amor* as well as the 38-bar passage imported from *Chor für Orchester* into *Messe für großes Orchester*.

Das Gesicht im Spiegel

Widmann composed his first full-length opera for the Munich Opera Festival in 2003. Sir Peter Jonas, manager of the Bavarian State Opera from 1993 to 2006, had explicitly commissioned a work that would not be based “on a plot much rehearsed in world literature from Euripides via Shakespeare to early modern dramatists,” but would instead address a contemporary issue. With this wish for an opera about what Widmann calls “the very particular madness of our time,” Jonas “pushed at an open door.”⁴ Roland Schimmelpfennig, one of the most-performed German dramatists of our time and only a few years older than the then 30-year-old Widmann, wrote the libretto.

Das Gesicht im Spiegel (The face in the mirror), “a music drama in 16 scenes,” broaches the issue of the biotechnological possibilities and emotional consequences that would result from a first successful attempt at human cloning. Three subsidiary themes define one third each of the opera: the biotech company owners’ dependence on stock-market fluctuations, the clone’s encounter with the world (and vice versa), and the problems arising in an archetypal love triangle. Subliminally one detects, once again, the subject matter that informed Widmann’s earlier music-dramatic works: the failure of empathic communication.

The biotechnological possibilities postulated in the opera and the anxieties these cause were highly topical in the first decade of the new millennium, following the brief but much-commented life of clone sheep Dolly (1996-2003). Would scientists one day be able to clone a human? And what spiritual and psychological dangers would result from such an act of manipulative interference into a person’s life? Roland Schimmelpfennig’s libretto explores this conundrum by means of a fascinating plot. The couple Patrizia and Bruno, joint owners of a biotech company, hope for a breakthrough on the desolate stock market: their engineer Milton has succeeded in creating a living copy of Patrizia. This Justine, “born” as a young woman, learns language from Milton and achieves—step by step but with lightning speed—a familiarity with her environment. She is never to know that she is a mere duplicate, and therefore must be prevented from seeing herself in a mirror. Owing to her limited participation in life and particularly in the competitive work world, she remains endearingly innocent. Both Bruno, whose marriage to Patricia has cooled, and Justine’s “creator” Milton fall in love with her.

⁴Widmann in the interview with R. Karlitschek und H. Krellmann, program booklet, 33.

When Patrizia and Bruno present their “product” to the media, they stress a distinctive feature: Justine can feel pain but is unable to degenerate physically since any injured member or organ will immediately repair itself. This is demonstrated by means of an explosion, which causes Justine unimaginable suffering but leaves her as good as new. Although Justine has no inkling of her descent as a copy of Patrizia, she increasingly resists the exploitation at the hands of the biotech trio, eventually frees herself from Milton’s monitoring cables, and declares her love for Bruno. Bruno in turn decides to begin a new life with Justine and to leave his marriage, home, and company. In preparation he steals Milton’s production plans, believing that with them he would theoretically be able to reproduce Justine at any place and time. On his way to Paris his plane crashes and he dies. Justine is puzzled by her feelings of great sadness. Patrizia, by now jealous of her clone, chooses this moment to drag Justine in front of a mirror, confronting her with the fact that she is a mere copy. As a result, Justine attempts to kill herself, while Patrizia and Milton decide to develop a new prototype that would under no circumstances develop feelings.⁵

The opera has a total playing time of 135 minutes. Instrumentation and vocal casting surprise in several regards. The fact that not only Patrizia, the ambitious business woman, but also the innocent young girl cloned from her genetic material are sopranos is immediately convincing in the light of Justine’s derived identity. But the two male protagonists, Patrizia’s pessimistic and maritally disenchanted husband and Milton, the company’s successful engineer, are equally characterized by a shared vocal register. One can thus “hear,” even before the story begins to unfold, that these two men will show similar emotions and experience comparable failures.

The four soloists are juxtaposed to a children’s choir representing a communal voice. The audience never learns whom these children represent. In one moment they speak like economic experts, the next like news reporters of unidentified broadcasting companies who inform listeners about the weather, the time, the density of traffic, the developments of the stock market, and all kinds of accidents. In their knowledge, which often surpasses the respective situation, they are occasionally reminiscent of the chorus in ancient Greek tragedies. But when they spell out the alphabet in a mixture of computer terms, technical expressions, and fashionable brand

⁵The complete libretto of the revised version of the opera *Das Gesicht im Spiegel*, which was premiered in March 2010 in Düsseldorf Opera House, can be found in Appendix I, reprinted with kind permission of the theater’s dramaturgy department.

names, or when they briefly engage in a tussle (thereby hurting Justine and prompting her question about the meaning of the red fluid issuing from her body), they appear as the children they are. Widmann deploys the children's choir as his fifth protagonist since he believes children to have a particularly high subversive potential. This potential is exploited both linguistically and musically. Not only do the children have the most disturbing texts, their repertoire of vocal articulations is possibly even more extreme than that of the four soloists, in that they get to sing extensive glissandos or shifts, and to imitate percussive effects and various kinds of dense sound structures.

The orchestra, comparably small with only 23 players, serves a large number of instruments and sonic sources. In the classical families of winds and strings, the omissions are at least as telling as the alternative instruments. The woodwinds, leading in registral range and color scale with ten instruments between piccolo flute and contrabass clarinet, leave out the oboes. The brass section doubles the French horn and substitutes a small trumpet for the tuba. The strings play without any violas; instead they encompass four violins and three cellos as well as a very active and often entirely independent double bass. Among the chordal instruments, not only piano and celesta but also the guitar group (including mandolin, bandurria, and banjo) act as part of the percussion section. A zither, replacing a harp in this work, is even listed among the other percussion instruments. Conversely, the accordion plumbs the entire expressive range from organ-like pedal chords via melodies to surreal sound effects. These 31 instruments are complemented by a multipartite percussion⁶ as well as ten music boxes and a tape for prerecorded interjections. Essential parts in the orchestral score are typically entrusted to the four different clarinets and to the accordion, something that becomes all the more noticeable as the work progresses. It seems as if Widmann wanted to stress with his favorite instruments that in a world determined by alienating motives, the clone develops into the only truly feeling human.

⁶The large percussion section, executed by two players except for the musical glasses and the lotus flutes, comprises tuned and untuned instruments along with sources of a variety of unpitched sounds. The reverberating materials are metal (glockenspiel, vibraphone, tubular bells, crotales, nipple gongs, cowbells, steel drum; cymbal, Chinese cymbal, tamtam, Peking opera gongs, water gong, triangle, and flexatone), wood (xylophone, xylorimbass; woodblock sets, claves, maracas, whip, ratchet, and guiro), membrane (timpani; large and small drums, tomtom set, rototom set, bongos, and [Brazilian] tamborim), pipe (lotus flutes, whistle, and toy whistles), or glass (the glass harp consists of seven wine glasses filled with different amounts of water, made to "sing" at precise pitches by running a moistened finger around their rim).

The sixteen scenes run *attacca* into one another. The seamless transition is often achieved by way of a sustained sonority tied across the section ending, be it in winds or strings, in the accordion, the singing glasses, a bowed cymbal, an electronically generated sub-bass tone, other sound cushions added from a tape, or even a rhythmically sung note repetition straddling the bar line. If an opera house wishes to schedule an intermission, the composer allows it after scene 10. Preferably though, the connection between scenes 9 and 10 should also be seamless.

While the librettist does not suggest a grouping into acts, Widmann models the music in such a way that one distinguishes three blocks, corresponding with the three dramatic themes mentioned above. Scenes 1-5, which can be summarized under the imaginary heading “Saving the company by way of a biotechnological breakthrough,” are surrounded by two musical sections in which the children’s choir plays a dominant role. With the subsequent scenes 6-10, a kind of potpourri of dances and arias around the clone, Widmann closes a larger frame, insofar as the singing glasses setting in at the end of scene 10 refer back to the only earlier use of this sonority at the beginning of scene 1. The remaining scenes 11-16 are threaded together by the emotional development with its opera-typical connection of love and death. At the very end, Widmann leads his music back to its tonal point of departure when he lets the work fade on a high C—the pitch that at the opera’s beginning gradually crystallizes as a low bass note from compressed unpitched sounds.

In terms of their playing time, these three blocks of scenes relate to one another approximately as 3 : 4 : 7. The music of the concluding block exceeds in its temporal unfolding not only the sum of the two preceding blocks, thus counteracting the thematically tripartite structure with an underlying balance of two halves. What is more, the four longest scenes in that last block seem to symbolically overwhelm some of the earlier scenes, particularly those that trace the intentions and the successful development of the human clone.⁷ This seems appropriate, for by the time the opera reaches that third block, the “duplicate” Justine has advanced to the position of central protagonist. It is clearly she who expresses the most authentic emotions. She can thus be perceived as holding a mirror up to her profit- and fame-oriented designers, as it were, and thus turning the table on what is suggested in the operatic title.

⁷Scene 12 is longer than the sum of scenes 1 + 2 or 4 + 5; the same goes for scene 16. Scene 13 alone with ca. 25 minutes of playing time is longer than the two scene pairs above taken together or the sum of the three central scenes in the second block (7 + 8 + 9).

The shortest scenes, those in the first five-scene block, are concise in their musical structure. The five sections in the opera's center, featuring the three biotechnicians advertising the cloning of humans in general and their result Justine in particular, combine arias and various dances, self-contained segments that suggest a vicinity to the music-theater tradition. The six scenes in the final group, addressing the various facets of the love-and-death dyad, contain a disproportionately large number of rests, passive elongations, and other manifestations of musical stasis. Widmann thus uses musical means to stress that the story—in its development from stock-market frenzy via interactions characterized by an almost complete lack of empathy to a final confrontation with the essential questions of life—undergoes an unrelenting deceleration to a point of near-paralysis.

The exposition in the narrow sense encompasses the first three scenes. These introduce the *dramatis personae* (the children's choir in the first scene, the three biotechnicians in the second, and Justine in the third) as well as the conflicts (place, time, circumstances, and extension of the stock-market crash in the first scene, the ice age in the marriage of the company owners in the second, and the three biotechnicians' divergent reactions to the cloning success in the third). Only the three basic musical elements—a seven-part chord, an ostinato rhythm, and a metrically defined sequence—have all been established by the end of the initial scene.

The seven-part chord begins its slow ascent at the moment when the children's choir, in its first contribution, sings about the sunrise. The grounding C3, initially hidden in the strings' slow high-pressure bowing on the bridge and in the winds' articulation with much air and little pitch content, finally emerges as an actual pitch in m. 15 where it is sounded by a flute and a singing glass before being taken over by a child soloist. From this C then emerges a sound structure that, because of its rise in decreasing interval size, can be heard (or interpreted) as an "artificial overtone series": C4-G4-B \flat 4-C5-D5-E5-F \sharp 5.

EXAMPLE 57: The "sunrise chord" (Sc. 1, mm. 16-31)

(♩ = 50)

3/4 4/4 3/4 4/4 3/4 4/4 4/4

Rot der Mor - - gen Os - - - ten Kla - rer Him - - mel

(alto 1) (mezzo 1)

lang-sam zieht der Tag her - auf.

(soprano 1, mezzo 1, alto 1)

Rot (child soloist 4)

The spouses' conversation in scene 2 about the stock market collapse is accompanied by repeated transpositions of a bass figure derived from the characteristic intervallic three-tone beginning of the sunrise chord. Even more impressive is Justine's vocalise in scene 4, in which she develops a melodic variant of the overtone ascent above E—the pitch on whose higher octave she only just “stepped into life”:

EXAMPLE 58: Justine's “sunrise”

Scene 4, mm. 1-4, 5-7 = 1 min. m. 8 ($\text{♩} = 50$)

Justine: vocalises

The opera's other cyclical components are also introduced in scene 1 by the children's choir. The rhythm is heard for the first time at the moment when the “sunrise chord,” having been briefly replaced, is restored. Set against the constant pulse of $\text{♩} = 60$ maintained by the children's choir and the instruments accompanying them, individual children's voices sing “dadadada ♯ dada ♯ dada ♯” etc. in an unsynchronized, exceedingly fast tempo ($\text{♩} = 132$). With this imitation of a news ticker they underscore the other choristers' increasing frenzy. As a result of the cacophony, the choir's utterances change from singing via *Sprechgesang* and shouts to chaotic screams, resembling the behavior of stockbrokers.

The metric sequence is introduced almost simultaneously with the ticker rhythm. In it, the regular beats of common 4/4 time are replaced by three irregular values in the form of $\text{♩} \cdot \text{♩} \cdot \text{♩}$, a variant of the 3 + 3 + 2 pattern that Widmann so prominently employs in his piano sonata *Fleurs du mal*. Initially interjected only reticently between longer passages of different material, the sequence gains momentum and by the end of the scene reaches a tangible presence that, highlighted by note repetition, gives an impulse to the whole of scene 2 as well as several later sections in the opera. The metric organization, an expression of joy in many cultures, will be heard in this context as suggesting lurching insecurity and, particularly in connection with the note repetition, a kind of mental jail. The component dominates scene 2 almost completely and recurs many times thereafter, until the theme of profit-making finally recedes from scene 9 onward.

EXAMPLE 59: The component symbolizing mental captivity

Scene 1, mm. 131-136 ($\text{♩} = 208$)

Im-mer den Blick auf die Gra-fik, im-mer den Blick auf die Kur-ve

The transition to scene 2 is almost imperceptible as Bruno adopts this component on a repeated C. The text sung in the first two thirds of the scene surprises with a paragraph that recurs with only minimal variation in fourfold reiteration. Freely translated, the two company owners sing:

Always the glance at the graphic, always the glance at the stock
chart, into the newspaper, at the monitor, all lanes closed, the
markets collapse, she knows it and I know it, the prices plummet.

The refrain-like reiteration leads one to expect a musical setting as a rondo. This form would indeed have brought out one aspect of the conflict: the constantly recurring thought of financial ruin. Unusual in a rondo but not unheard-of would have been the fact that of the four textual “episodes,” two each are largely similar.⁸

Widmann, however, composes the linguistic refrains in four quite different ways. In his layout for this segment of the scene, he opts for another, psychologically perhaps even more suited musical structure: that of the Pindaric ode. Its juxtaposition of “strophe” and “antistrophe” allows him to highlight not only the spouses’ shared concern for the survival of their company but also their very different assessment of its well-being and the health of their marriage, before the third section, the “epode,” adds some conclusions.

The “strophe” (which strictly speaking begins after four introductory measures) is entirely reserved for Bruno’s tendency toward pessimism and doomsday scenarios. He sings 68 of his 89 measures as note repetitions on a small number of pitches, and the remaining lines in narrow chromatic curves. Meanwhile the double bass, the only representative of the string contingent in Bruno’s strophe, plays fourteen reiterations of the “sunrise” chord’s three-note beginning. Yet this instrumental contribution does not trigger any sign of a brightened mood in Bruno, nor does it raise him from his lethargy. The “antistrophe,” initially entrusted to Patrizia but repeatedly complemented by Bruno, is musically quite different. While it corresponds to the preceding strophe in terms of length (89 measures) and playing time (owing to a consistent tempo), only fifteen of the measures feature note

⁸Compare Bruno’s lines in mm. 28-54 (episode 1): “Minus 17, the stock index reads: we are yesterday’s losers, and she gazes at the monitor, Patrizia, my wife, or by now only my partner, stands there and gazes at the charts running across the screen” and in mm. 78-93 (episode 2): “everywhere, AGIF, mediclin and procon, and we ourselves, our company, minus 17, we are on our way to the bottom” with the only minimally varied text sung alternately by Patrizia alone and the two spouses together in mm. 116-140 (episode 3) and mm. 164-182 (episode 4) respectively.

repetitions. What is more, these few note repetitions are all owed to Bruno's mood-dampening interjections: in thirteen of these measures, Bruno joins Patrizia in octave parallels; the remaining two measures form the beginning of a note-by-note quotation (compare mm. 39-42: "Patrizia, my wife" with mm. 128-29: "Bruno, my husband"). Even more obvious is the brief identity of the vocal lines in the text segments "She/he stands there and gazes at the [charts]" in mm. 48-50 and mm. 134-36. The intimacy of this juxtaposition is underscored by the fact that the voices in both "strophe" and "antistrophe" are for the most part accompanied by nothing but a homorhythmically supporting accordion, the double bass, and ornamental clarinet arabesques.

The "epode" is opened by Bruno, who in his growing panic believes to see the inevitable bankruptcy of their company already happening. The intervals of his vocal line are suddenly disturbingly large; his voice seems to totter helplessly through space, surrounded by "murmured" runs in the extreme instrumental registers (flutes above bass and contrabass clarinets). Patrizia has come to very different conclusions. Her optimistic exclamation "all this will change today, the future is brilliant" is reassured by a softly muted trombone as a secondary voice and bolstered by a consonant chord sustained in the strings and low clarinets, along with various yowling noises. The longer the dialogue of the two spouses lasts, the more autistic Bruno appears at the side of an increasingly euphoric Patrizia. Tutti interjections of the ostinato ticker rhythm assert her market- and media-compliant thinking. As she inserts some note repetitions into the remaining 15 measures, she distinctly changes their character; the monotony no longer sounds dejected as it did in Bruno's lines but autosuggestive: "Our future is brilliant. We are the first, we overtake ... in Rome, Seattle, and Paris ... incessantly." When the spouses' final octave-paralleled note repetition turns into the coda with "Today is the day," Patrizia is beside herself with enthusiasm while Bruno is frozen in terror.

In this pithy closing segment, the bioengineer Milton finally appears on stage. As if striving for profit was superior to scientific ambition, he adopts the stock addicts' metrical component when he uses A, T, G, and C, the abbreviations for the four DNA nucleobases, to spell a kind of genetic code. This consolidates the wedge between Bruno, now almost paralyzed with fear of the expected catastrophe, and Patrizia, whose warbles in tritone amplitude make her sound barking mad. The final 16-bar crescendo unites winds and strings with piano, accordion, and guitar in a polyrhythmic rapture, abruptly cut short after a concluding cymbal roll.

As this brief account of the scene shows, Widmann uses structure and compositional details to present the juxtaposition of the two interrelated protagonists in a kind of musical equivalent of the dialectical triad. The pessimistic Bruno proposes his thesis that the couple's company must inevitably collapse. Against this, Patrizia's antithesis holds her trust in a breakthrough that will change everything. Milton's announcement that he has successfully cloned Patrizia then closes the triad with a synthesis of sorts.

This very human controversy, translated into intuitively comprehensible musical means, is answered in scene 3 with a stark contrast. The structure is a near reversal of the one just described: a 30-second prelude (opened with an electronically generated sound of static multiphonics fed in from a tape, various unconnected syllables, and snap attacks) is followed by two halves of nearly equal extension. In the first half, the instrumental contribution consists primarily of noises and unpitched sounds, while the vocal participation develops step by step from monotonous speech via *Sprechgesang* to singing. The musical structure of the section can be heard as a satire of the preceding scene, which comes across as more serious not least owing to its being modeled on a Greek ode. The first half of scene 3 encompasses not two but three parallel "strophes" in diverging mood.

- The first strophe begins with Patrizia's monotonously murmured confession ("How long have I been waiting for this moment..."), with which she responds to her company's success in human cloning by vacillating between relief and incredulity. The three biotechnicians' complementing tercet consists exclusively of single letters, meaningless syllables, and several non-linguistic sounds, thus sounding like panic-stricken stuttering. Only an occasional "is she" stands out as an intelligible linguistic island.
- In the second strophe, Milton repeats Patrizia's confession with much emotion before a backdrop of wild contrabass clarinet runs. This leads to a similarly brief second tercet, accompanied by some of the strings in *col legno battuto o saltando*. The singing is once again based on disparate syllables; these do, however, coagulate every now and then to actual words and stammered questions.
- In the third strophe Bruno states that unlike Patrizia and Milton he has not been waiting impatiently for this moment but dreaded the possibility. The subsequent tercet, longer than the preceding ones, has the three biotechnicians proceed from *Sprechgesang* to singing and from nucleobase letter-names and chemical formulas to

exclamations of surprise. When the two men—Bruno anxious to convince himself, Milton effusive—end by praising the perfection of their cloning product (which is still invisible to the audience), their singing and the overtone play of the accompanying instruments is brutally interrupted by *sfz* beats of the large drum and a persistent din of the woodblock sets.

In the second half of the scene, Milton suddenly waxes lyrical above low winds and strings when he pronounces the rule of conduct: Justine may never see herself in a mirror; she is not to know that she is merely a genetically engineered copy. The scene ends with her appearance on stage.

Scenes 4 and 5, which substantiate what has so far been dramatically shown, are musically clad in a compressed and modified repetition of the exposition. The reiteration of the “sunrise” chord from scene 1 in Justine’s first vocalises was already mentioned. Milton’s ceremonious introduction of the new human being with, “her name is Justine” begins with the arioso contour he had already used in scene 3 when his injunction “But she may never know” had introduced a more lyrical mood. Here again he is accompanied only by the low winds and strings as well as an almost inaudible accordion tone in the highest octave.

EXAMPLE 60: Milton’s pose as a “creator”

<p>Scene 3, mm. 47-53</p>  <p>Doch darf sie nie-mals wis-sen was sie ist, Pa-tri-zias E-ben-bil</p>	<p>Scene 4, mm. 27-31</p>  <p>ihr Na-me ist Jus - ti - ne, Pa-tri-zias E-ben-bild</p>
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The tercets of scene 3, which become consonant only in a gradual three-step process, are superseded by the first ensemble climax in scene 4, the fervent “welcome quartet.” At the end of scene 4, Widmann condenses the earlier horizontal contrast of spoken confessions and largely incomprehensible tercets into a vertical juxtaposition: Patrizia’s spoken reproaches against the clone’s inarticulate utterances are vertically overlaid with Justine’s vocalises. She initially hums in a childlike voice but later, under the influence of anxiety and anger in the face of Patrizia’s impatience, breaks out into wide-spaced leaps.

In scene 5 the children’s choir, which in scene 1 seemed to consist of weather, traffic, and stock market commentators and thereby to belong to the positivist world of movers and shakers, turns into Justine’s secret accomplice and prompter when they join in a rhythmical recitation of various technical terms and brand names to teach her the alphabet and,

through it, convey to her the basis for independent speech which she so far lacked.⁹ Musically, the children's calling, by presenting each term or name in note-repetition and even remaining for long stretches on the same pitch, is reminiscent of Bruno's phrases in scene 2, while its rhythm often repeats the "dadadada ♪ dada ♪ dada ♪" with which individual children imitated the news ticker in scene 1. (This ticker rhythm, which in the course of scene 1 accompanied long passages either verbally or instrumentally, is recalled explicitly in the orchestral interlude at the end of scene 5 where it sounds—inversely highlighted as a soft interjection between tumultuously loud passages—in the flutes. This element thus contributes to the framing of the five-scene block.)

The second block, comprising scenes 6-10, is similarly laid out with regard to the unfolding of the music-dramatic development. The first three scenes are strongly contrasted with one another but together create the effect of pressing forward. They are followed by a lyrical scene and one that is distinguished by the participation of the children's choir. Scene 6 makes Justine into a demonstration model created to raise the company's market value. She is not primarily a human being, but above all the result of a scientific experiment. Viewed no longer as a miracle awaiting realization but now as a product, she is presented to the public in the hope of raising share prices. Scene 7 like scene 2 turns around the twin topics of hope for a future made prosperous by the clone and the company owners' marriage. Justine's "creator" Milton must acknowledge that not everything runs according to his plan, insofar as he seems to have cloned not only Patrizia's genome but also her memory and her early love for Bruno. In scene 8 as in scene 3 Justine completes new developmental steps in her encounters with Patrizia and Bruno. Now she learns to associate names to persons; she also experiences, without quite understanding, her attraction to Bruno. The articulation of this feeling is encapsulated in her lyrical love aria in scene 9. In scene 10, the children's choir describes a night's loneliness and deceptive calm, thereby insinuating to the audience that exactly one day has passed since the sunrise at the beginning of the opera.

⁹The fact that Justine enters the world as a young adult and, as becomes obvious later, inherits the emotional memory of her genome donor Patrizia but needs to learn language and a basic understanding of the world like a child (albeit in lightning speed) represents a logical and biological inconsistency permissible only in an opera. The clone sheep Dolly, whose "creation" seven years earlier had inspired the choice of the subject matter, had been carried to term in a mother-sheep's womb, was born as a lamb, and then developed in the speed and sequence characteristic of its species.

Widmann composes the company owners' advertising campaign for the new biotechnological product with much musical irony as a coffee-house waltz in rondo form. The refrains, entrusted to Bruno as the company's public relations manager, are not linked by melodic or harmonic similarity.¹⁰ Instead they resemble one another in tempo and a closely related "humbdada" accompaniment in the low winds, which Bruno often contrasts with a vocal 3/4-time duplet (♩. ♩.). The first two episodes offer opportunities for Milton and Patrizia to add their own media statements. But then the mood changes and becomes oppressive. In the third episode, Bruno, seeking to demonstrate Justine's wondrous powers of bodily regeneration, uses an explosive to turn her into a bleeding wreck. After half a minute of purposefully harmless-sounding glockenspiel tinkling, she reappears to the gaping audience, intact and as good as new. Bruno's spurious praise, in which he calls her "a perfect soldier of progress," is taken up cynically in the next refrain, where each strong beat is preceded by a crescendoing roll on the military drum. After Bruno has explained that the clone, despite its miraculous powers of immediate regeneration, feels pain like any other human being, and after he has turned the corresponding audio switch, one suddenly hears heartbreaking sobs and screams: Justine's cries, "ejected with highest energy" and instrumentally complemented by rhythmic accents in the lowest and highest registers, bolt in a 23-measure accelerando toward the concluding orchestral interlude. There, the coffee-house music seems finally to have been turned over to a fair-ground band, which uses out-of-tune winds to emphasize the macabre and offensive quality of Bruno's "presentation waltz."

Milton's monologue in scene 7 begins with a music that shows him utterly shocked and nearly paralyzed. While the orchestral instruments, in frantic speed, divide each quarter-note beat simultaneously into 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 fractions, his vocal line with the exclamation "the time" moves in tortuously long note values, stretching whole-tone glissandos from B_♭ to C and from D_♭ to E_♭ over five and four measures respectively. So dizzy is he when seeing the speed of processes in the cloned human body that he sidesteps his habitual atonal language in favor of pure, consonant lines with repetitions and sequences distinguished only by rhythmic variation:

¹⁰Only when the orchestra briefly assumes the melodic leadership in the waltz segments is there a recognition effect. Compare the brief passage of mm. 40-42 in the first refrain, which recurs almost identically in mm. 169-172 of the fourth refrain and, somewhat modified, in mm. 200-202 of the orchestral epilogue.

EXAMPLE 61: Milton's reflection on the speed of cell division

Scene 7, mm. 10-14, 27-31

8 in je - der Se - kun - de at - met ihr Kör-per tei - len sich Zel-len, at-met ihr Kör - per

Milton is completely flabbergasted when he is forced to admit that his biotechnologically based creative act has no influence on what goes on in the clone's mind and heart. In phrases addressing this conundrum, his vocal line repeatedly falls back into the metric constellation 3 + 3 + 2 combined with a 3/4-time duplet that was prominently heard in the context of stock-market anxieties ("Always the glance at the ..."). It seems that even when reflecting on the ethical implications of his experiments he cannot forget his concerns for profit. As if to reassure himself he keeps spelling his chemical formulas, trying to rule out that a possible sequencing mistake on his part might be responsible for Justine's unintended feelings. When he ultimately falls into the waltz Bruno had chosen for his press conference, the music reveals something Milton's words attempt to conceal: that his dismay at Justine's lacking love for her "creator" is only his most superficial concern, hiding the fact that his thoughts are actually directed toward business success and fame.

The extensive and diversified scene 8 begins with a one-minute-long orchestral prelude set under the apt heading "Ballet mécanique." Two tutti segments initiated by rototoms frame a central passage. Its first half features runs in free counterpoint that culminate in the "horse neighing" of three brass instruments; its second half is dominated by trenchant woodblock virtuosity above rhythmic accents of the *col legno saltando*-playing strings. A speech segment with only sparse homorhythmic accompaniment, which at the moment of Justine's first complete word ("Welcome") leads to wildly oscillating glissando curves in one of the cellos, is itself enclosed in a reiteration of the strings' rhythmic *col legno saltando* accents. These accents provide the backdrop for the initially unsuccessful dialogue in the course of which—speech development in fast-forward mode—Justine learns to call herself and those around her by their proper names. In the wake of this achievement, sustained sonorities, extremely wide-spaced glissandos and a rising horn line allude to the artificial overtone series from scene 1, thus suggesting symbolically that this moment represents a new kind of "sunrise."

The following section carries the heading “Aria of the stock-market queen Patrizia.” In this four-minute feat, which is only briefly interrupted by Justine, the business woman moves from stammering and stuttering to melismatic glissando curves with perfect-fifth amplitude, from breathless telephone-style staccato to slow static tones, and from erotically charged lyricisms to a rise to the highest register and a steep plunge over two octaves (instrumentally multiplied in sudden unison at “without comparison”). Her credo, “the glance at the graphic, the glance at the stock chart,” is embedded in the by now familiar metric component and leads her to an equation of life with money, of Justine’s existence with the value of her company. At this point Justine cuts in by repeating words and tonal contour of this credo slowly and softly above a calmly sustained sonority. Patrizia, however, is not to be stopped. To the contrary: She launches her next utterances like a jazz solo, albeit in breakneck speed. At “the market, the money, the share in you rises and rises and rises...” her exaltation reaches a climax with a chain of octave leaps ending in screams. Utterly exhausted and breathing stertorously as if in an asthma attack, she sings the last segment of her aria—without denying herself a renewed magical invocation of graphic and stock chart in the concomitant metric pattern.

At this point Justine emancipates herself as a person and as a voice to be reckoned with. In a much slower tempo and a melodic guise all her own supported by a new sustained sonority, she repeats as if incredulously the magical words about graphic and stock chart. Then, at what hindsight will reveal as the musical center of this watershed scene, she poses without any preamble the crucial question of this opera: “And who are you”? Since she initially pronounces this without specifying a particular addressee, Patrizia takes the question as relating to her. But Justine has by now learned to use speech self-confidently and is able to declare with a distinct “No, you”: she is wondering about Bruno. The accordion marks the twofold “you” with crescendoing pitch pile-ups, a feature that will accompany Justine’s emotional development throughout the remainder of the opera.

With this emancipation, the protagonists’ constellation within the scene is reverted. Patrizia’s “aria” gives way to a duet uniting Justine and Bruno, Patrizia’s hectic to a heartfelt *Andante*, and Justine’s brief interruption of Patrizia’s soliloquy is matched now by Patrizia’s equally brief and attempt, unsuccessful in the midst of the love-stricken couple’s first rapprochement, to return the conversation to “the market.” While Patrizia’s solo received constant comments from the percussion, occasionally even with aggressively intruding noises, the instrumental texture underlying the duet is entirely free of unpitched tones. Owing to its great calm, the duet

extends over seven minutes. Its playing time thus corresponds to the sum of the “Ballet mécanique,” the beginning of the scenic action, and Patrizia’s aria. Widmann unfolds the first segment of this duet above an iridescent sustained sonority: winds, strings, and accordion together build a vertical stacking of $B_b/E_b/F/A_b/B_b/C_b$ in which only the tone swapping among neighboring parts creates a subtle sense of movement in stasis. With perfect logic, the duet’s new beginning following Patrizia’s interruption is anchored in a transposition of the same iridescent sonority. Justine’s final “you” launches a process whose musical symbolism could not be more touching: in the course of more than a minute, one orchestral instrument after the other joins Justine’s “signature pitch” E_4 , the octave below the tone on which she had first stepped into the world in scene 4.

Starting scene 9 from this E_4 as an anchor, Justine sings a moving aria in which she attempts to understand her feelings for Bruno. All percussion remains silent; winds and strings depart step by chromatic step from the central tone E_4 , as if wanting to reverse the recent convergence process. The instruments thus open a tonal space for a choral web that the accordion ultimately joins as well. The individual instruments’ small-step progressions result in a gamut of iridescent sonorities that soar all the way from consonant dominant-seventh chords to chromatic clusters extending over several octaves. The music’s incessant internal fluctuation shows how metaphorically unstable the ground under Justine’s feet has become in the course of her path toward full consciousness.

At Justine’s puzzled query (“My heart, why does it feel so heavy?”), the music ends a perfect fourth higher than it had begun, with three-tone clusters whose outer pitches converge in glissandos into A_4 and A_6 . In a reversal of this motion, and thus in perfect-fourth transposition of the orchestral gesture heard at the beginning of the preceding scene, the children’s choir now opens scene 10: the word “night,” sounding unaccompanied, expands the tonal space on both sides of the unison A_4 , proceeding once again in very small steps. While the children’s words describe a city that has come to a nocturnal standstill, a single nipple-gong beat triggers an accompaniment in cellos and bass. This layer is initially restricted to unison pedals. Then various woodwinds join one by one. Once the children’s voices have softened to a whispered canon, the orchestral instruments are reinforced by cymbal, timpani, piano, and accordion. In the further course of the scene singing alternates with whispering, poetic reflections progress to technical descriptions of the electronic processes that continue into the night’s darkness and from there to pure onomatopoeia (“tikitiki tukutuku”), while the orchestra alternates sustained sonorities with homophonic dupli-

cation or sudden silences. The music of this dramatically retarding scene, which Widmann has fundamentally rewritten for the opera's revised version premiered in 2010, is purely atmospheric. Just before the eight-part children's choir and its accompanying instruments fade away, four singing glasses (D₄, B₄, F₅, C₆) enter one after the other creating a glass-harp sonority that—unless it is interrupted by an intermission—resonates far into the beginning of the third block of scenes.

Scene 11 presents another retarding element, albeit one that differs in all parameters from the preceding one; only the final eight measures bring about an unexpected dramatic turn. The very slow music, by and large not metrically fixated, begins in continuation of the end of scene 10 with the four-part glass-harp sonority, which drops one pitch after the other in the course of the first two minutes. Patrizia and Justine are asleep in adjacent rooms. For the duration of five minutes, they are merely heard dreaming: humming and softly singing against the backdrop of sustained accordion sonorities, interrupted by long silences. When the four singing glasses set in again, the two sopranos' lines makes it clear how fundamentally alike the clone and her genome donor are. Although both are asleep separated by a wall, their tones interleave in the manner of a vocal tone-color melody to form a single contour. One by one, the voices and the few instruments converge on a multi-octave B₄ (the dominant of Justine's E).

When both women simultaneously begin to dream of Bruno, the music insinuates the hidden conflict before it even reaches the sleepers' consciousness and verbal articulation. The two sopranos' earlier consensual unison, as it is now complemented by a solo clarinet representing a third "other," suddenly splits into a semitone parallel. At this the clarinet duplicates in turn. Their duet imitates the singers' dissonant motions by engaging in a two-clarinet semitone parallel, soon followed by two flutes. When the thought of a "jarring duplication" finally enters Patrizia's dream consciousness, bongo rolls and banjo *saltandi* convey her growing internal restlessness. These symbols of friction and fright inspire the two sopranos to sing, to differing words ("my mirror image"/"Patrizia's husband"), a wide-spaced parallel not anchored in any tonality. Only when the women's attention briefly turns to Milton, who is seen still brooding over his formulas, do they pass into vocalises ornamented with trills of minor-third or major-third amplitude. (Widmann specifies the intended sound quality: "luring like sirens but at the same time frightened / shivering / trembling.")

With this scenic reminiscence of Milton, his experiment in cloning, and the problematic relationship between the two women still caught in agitated dreams, the sound spectrum changes once again. One after another,

ten music boxes begin to play from scattered instrumentalists' places, soon joined by the glockenspiel. The music boxes with their various folk songs and familiar tunes from classical piano miniatures suggest at once the idyllic world of a child's sheltered life and, owing to their staggered entries and the protracted tenfold jumble, an emotional chaos. Before this backdrop, Patrizia wakes up and passes from singing to speech, while a voice transformer doubles Justine's continued singing in a distorted way, thereby giving expression to her increasing internal dividedness, which enters even her sleep. When Justine finally wakes up as well and, suddenly realizing that she is being instrumentalized, severs all the tubes and cables by means of which Milton monitors and protocols her physiological functions, the vocal split brought about by the voice transformer immediately stops. At that moment, all instruments fall away except for the music boxes and the sustained accordion sonority, which expands its soft background cluster until it covers the full chromatic range and reaches a resonant *forte*. Several tapes add a variety of shrill alarm tones and sirens signaling the perilous cessation of the clone's vital parameters, while Justine slowly walks off the stage.

The schizophrenic juxtaposition of music-box tunes with alarm sounds—of the musical symbols of childlike innocence with the result of a self-confident rejection of electronically controlled surveillance—continues to ring through the first minute of scene 12. It overlaps with the beginning of Milton's antiphonal exchange with the children's choir, which fills the ten-minute-long main body of this scene in a pattern of [a b c b a b c]. Milton himself is heard wavering between contrasting moods: singing about his regret that the night is about to end, his slow note values alternate between near screaming and a vibrato of "giant amplitude" [a]; pondering Justine's unexplained disappearance and the drop of all measuring data to zero he sounds hectic and palpably desperate [c].¹¹ Meanwhile, the three interjections of the children's choir [b]¹² develop from an attempt at consolation to brittleness. Their first utterance begins with a phrase that splits from A minor to 7- and 8-part chords with several cross-relationships:

¹¹For the expressive passages cf. mm. 2-9 (with trills in winds and strings) and mm. 134-165 (with a descent of the orchestral sound into the lowest register); for the hectic passages cf. mm. 54-124 (with various forceful attacks of the percussion) and mm. 169-194 (with *col legno saltando* interjections of all strings and airy sounds in the brass).

¹²Cf. mm. 27-52 (in several segments, accompanied by string harmonics), mm. 125-133 (reduced to a minimum, accompanied by string harmonics), and mm. 166-168 (shortened, with a solo violin above sustained sonorities, the end crescendoing to *ff*).

EXAMPLE 62: The distanced consolation of the children's choir (Sc. 12)Gespenstisch, ruhig, fahl ($\text{♩} = 72$)

27 mp *sempre*

Zwie-lich-t, der Mor-ge-n, O-s-ten, Ta-g, tie-fer Him-mel

The second segment of the children's choir begins in unison only to open to a 12-part chord. The third, launched from a perfect octave, leads to a dense, almost fully chromatic chord within that same octave, which ends with a rising glissando and then breaks off abruptly. The choral texts do not reveal any engagement with Milton's panic. Instead they state that the night is yielding and a new day is about to begin with a new sunrise. With this the emotionally distant choristers hark back to very similar words sung at the outset of scene 1, when the rise of a new day heralded the monumental stock-market crash. It seems as if text and music wanted to insinuate that Justine's self-liberation (externally from the cables and tubes, internally from the exploitation at the hand of her "creators") will bring about a new fiasco for the biotech company.

Milton's contours are particularly fascinating in the hectic passages. On the one hand he takes up the cyclically recurring metric constellation when he reiterates the by now familiar exclamation with minor modifications: "Always, always the, always the glance, always the glance at the monitor" he stutters on a protracted note repetition, suggesting a parallel of the stock charts and the measuring data of vital parameters. On the other hand Widmann grants him a motif of his own in which to couch the panic of this "creator of humans." Owing to immediate repetition and development, this motif is memorable even for first-time listeners. It is introduced with a kind of vocal cadenza:

EXAMPLE 63: Milton's panic, introduced with a cadenzaPresto ($\text{♩} = 184$)

ff $\text{ff} > \text{f} < \text{fff}$ *ff* senza misura (quasi Cadenza) *fff* *mf* *fff*

54

Ihr Bett ist leer

(leer) leer ihr Zim-mer leer

The three-note group falling through a (mostly minor) second and an octave or its neighboring intervals (major seventh/diminished octave and augmented octave/minor ninth) runs through both segments and is in addition lavishly imitated by various orchestral instruments.

This main body of the scene is followed by three more segments. During the first half minute the trombonist, by breathing heavily in and out through his instrument, creates sonorities that, according to Widmann's remark in the score, are to suggest "sounds of erotic intimacy." They form the audio track to Justine and Bruno's passionate embrace, which Milton watches on his computer screen. The second segment is a waltz. While the horrified Milton, later joined by Patrizia, keeps exclaiming "Justine ... what is she doing there?," the instruments begin in slow 3/4 time but then accelerate within a single minute to seven times the original pace. Since not only the drama but also the music have gone off course at this point, the orchestra attempts to save the situation. The musicians insert an instrumental interlude that takes up Bruno's "press conference waltz" in the out-of-tune fairground variant heard at the end of scene 6 ("press conference"), intensifying it to *feroce* and then letting it calm down. At the conclusion of this final, two-and-a-half-minute segment, the orchestral sound descends once again to the lowest register: "heavily booming" is the description for these measures, which are dominated by the bass and contrabass clarinets and finally even enhanced by a sub-bass tone from a tape.¹³

This low frequency, which is viscerally experienced rather than truly heard and meant to induce a kind of trance in its habitual dance-music context, evokes here an atmosphere of dark menace. As it rings on during the first five minutes of scene 13, it carries Milton's horror at Justine's betrayal over into the company owners' silent breakfast encounter. For the longest time the sub-bass underlies only a number of suffocating noises: a banjo is attacked with a wooden stick, a file, and various other tools, while Patrizia emits tormented, brittle gasps. Frustrated attempts at conversation are interrupted by long silences. In conjunction with the exceedingly slow tempo these raise the sense of paralysis to an unbearable level. A clarinet duet, in part moving in canon, translates the ideal at which the spouses fail: a twosome that is in intimate contact with one another.

The feeling of oppression diminishes only when Justine, whom stage directions have wandering around in the audience, intrudes with vocalises into the couple's stagnating togetherness, thereby concretizing Bruno's

¹³Widmann quotes this orchestral interlude in *Teufel Amor* for his suggestion of a ride to hell; cf. chapter I, p. 60.

longings. The orchestra answers with a slow, multipartite trill built from string harmonics and wind players' breathing sounds—a juxtaposition heard earlier, albeit very briefly, in the context of Milton's confusion in the preceding scene. The comforting sonic cushion encourages Bruno to join Justine's vocalises with his own yearning calls of her name. Thus united in a space between dream and reality they jointly sing "I love you." While Bruno softly recalls their embrace, the trills in winds and strings briefly slow down even further. Even Patrizia's outburst of fury, clad in a *Sprechgesang* fluctuating between *pp* and *ffff* before it ends in a scream, cannot dispel Bruno's tender mood. The atmosphere is only broken by the bitterly disappointed Milton will not accept that Justine's thoughts and feelings have eluded his creative influence.

A first musical climax of this scene is reached at the second vocal quartet of this opera, conceived as an antithesis to the earlier "welcome" quartet. While the structural placement of the two quartets in the fourth and the fourth-to-last scenes suggests symmetry,¹⁴ the two passages are fundamentally different with regard to both their music and their emotional attunement. The second quartet, twice as long as the first, develops above a harmonic basis that remains immobile for more than two minutes.¹⁵ A sense of hopelessness is created by further variants of the slow trill in winds and strings, the expanding whole-tone cluster that the accordion contributes in ever-growing volume, and improvisations in glockenspiel, crotales, piano, and guitar. The choice of words corroborates the overall impression. In the "welcome" quartet the three biotechnicians had articulated variants of an enthusiastic "She is perfect" crested by Justine's pre-linguistic vocalises; now Milton would gladly turn back time, Patrizia is filled with fury at her estranged husband and his infatuation with her lovely clone, while both Bruno and Justine know that their feelings actually belong to or are owed to Patrizia but hurt her nonetheless.

The "disenchantment" quartet ends abruptly with a general rest. Only more than two minutes later, after scattered spoken sentences and sounds that convey a sense of insecurity, the transition from an A-minor triad to the unison B enables a kind of new beginning. This B soon gives rise to a

¹⁴This symmetry is even realized in terms of performance time, despite the intended deceleration of the third block of scenes: The first quartet sets in a little less than 20 minutes after the opera opens, the second ends ca. 20 minutes before its final sound fades.

¹⁵The sustained A-major/minor sonority in the bass instruments and the tones oscillating above it (above all A/C/C#/F/A/A₂) are established 40 seconds before the singers embark on the actual quartet.

second, very soft confession of love, which is again cut short by a general rest. Bruno finally concludes this exceedingly long scene by announcing, in a seemingly twisted logic that owed to the confusion resulting from the successful cloning experiment: “I leave you and start a new life with you.” In manifold glissandos crossing one another in contrary motion—a musical image of extreme instability—the strings glide into scene 14.

Glissandos in new and reinforced form also dominate the next scene. It is the opera’s most unified entity, and Widmann has composed for it some truly haunting music. Slowly and asynchronously gliding tones in the strings prepare Bruno’s entry. Instruments and singer are then joined by fifteen vocal lines hummed by the three other soloists and the twelve children. The instructions for the presentation of the text Bruno sings and the lines the others hum are surprisingly similar: Bruno, now sitting in an airplane seat, is to sing “as if under tranquilizing drugs, in euphoric slowness beginning the glissandos in all phrases relatively low but gradually pushing the register up.” The other vocalists are asked to “hum extremely slow glissandos that rise and fall, beginning very low and ascending gradually.” The result of these combined developments is quite overwhelming: While Bruno’s words make us witness the evolution of his inner state, from incredulous wonder at his successful flight with Justine’s genome blueprint via his enthusiasm when looking from the plane’s window at a sunny sky all the way to his growing awareness of the impending airplane crash, his voice is being submerged in the ever higher, ever louder glissando waves around him. As a conclusion, a *fffff* beat on the water gong, whose protracted reverberation is overlaid with the wave-like rising and falling of rolls on cymbal and timpani, paint an onomatopoeic picture of drowning accident victims.

Scene 15, the shortest in the opera, is exclusively reserved for Justine’s grief-stricken weeping about Bruno’s death. Her singing, interrupted by sobs and expanded in a protracted *poco a poco ritardando*, writhes in a quarter-tonally gliding vocalise above a continuous F₁ sustained by the double bass and regular, slow, and soft F₂ quarter-note beats in the timpani. Not until the very end of the scene does she find words when she asks Milton about the fluid issuing from her eyes. His explanation that it is “nothing,” just “H₂O and a bit of salt,” proves once again how little this engineer—who hoped to be adored by his “creature”—takes her seriously as a human being. The chord accompanying Justine’s pain thins to leave only the octaves above the double bass’s continuing F₁, which lead smoothly in the final scene.

Scene 16 consists of three segments of approximately three minutes' duration each. In the first segment, which rises from the soft three-octave F tied over in accordion and double bass and now embedded in the deceptive harmlessness of celesta and glockenspiel, Patrizia uses "mean-colored" *Sprechgesang* to inform her look-alike that she is a mere copy, a machine, that none of her physical or emotional traits are uniquely her own. From off-stage, Bruno calls longingly for his late-in-life love, prompting Justine to confirm with a sweeping orchestral crescendo that his love is being requited. In the second segment, sforzatos in the percussion and the low winds drive the development toward the climactic moment when Patrizia forces Justine to stand beside her in front of a mirror. The cruel invitation is followed by a sequence of almost inaudible scraping and whistling noises. These eventually give way to Justine's anxiety-filled vocalise, which culminates in a twofold "existential scream." When she screams a second time and smashes the mirror, a sudden pure A-minor triad marks a climax owing both to its unexpected consonance and to the rare tutti coordination of winds, strings, pedal timpani, accordion, guitar, and children's choir. This chord unleashes the menacing sound of a rhythmic ostinato jointly executed on pedal timpani, large drum, and *col legno saltando* groups of the double bass, whose renewed crescendo drives the three soloists' and the children's unsynchronized vocal strands¹⁶ down the road and concludes in an instrumental *sfffffz > pppp*.

The third segment is composed as an epilogue. Surrounded by nothing but a single clarinet and the accordion—instruments that have emerged in the course of the opera as her faithful companions—Justine declares *quasi senza tempo* that, if she is not a human being, she prefers to die. When she picks up a sliver from the smashed mirror to cut her wrist, the audience know what she seems to forget: that her miraculous power of regeneration will make suicide impossible. The drama ends as the two remaining instruments rise into lofty heights, fading in the process.

The opera *Das Gesicht im Spiegel* is impressive on many counts, one of them being the expressive breadth of the vocal parts. Justine's five solo passages cover a particularly wide spectrum of intensities and emotions. In

¹⁶Patrizia's and Milton's justifications sound in homorhythmically alternating octaves and tritones with identical text, Justine gives vent to her shock in rhythmically unspecified interval leaps of ninths and tenths, while the children's choir uses a rhythmically repeated four-part chord to enumerate the building blocks of human body, as if to emphasize that these are the same whether the body has been naturally conceived or cloned, and in no case unique: "The blood, the heart, the veins, the eyes, the ears, the mouth, the skin."

scene 4 her vocalises, sung in childlike timbre, mark her entry into the world; in scene 6 these are brutally contrasted with her cries of pain that indicate how much this clone, treated as a profit-raising advertisement, suffers when submitted to the demonstration of her in-built capacity of physical regeneration. Her moving love aria in scene 9 and her sobs of grief over Bruno's death in scene 15 present a second pair of contrasts, this time characterizing a mature young woman with profound feelings. In the final scene 16, her voice traverses once again the whole gamut, from pouting self-affirmation via a renewed assertion of her feelings for Bruno and her shock on occasion of Patrizia's nastily enforced confrontation with her mirror image all the way to her reaction to the new insight: the wish not to live on as an artificial product but to end her life.

Bruno's solo passages cover an almost equally vast expressive field. In his long "strophe" in scene 2 his singing is dominated by hopelessness both in its contour and in its emotional depth. Conversely, when he acts as a publicity agent in scene 6 and praises the product that is to avert bankruptcy from his and Patrizia's company, he appears like a hyperactive salesman. In scene 14 his emotions evolve in parallel to the trajectory of the plane he has boarded in his flight: rising in *Sprechgesang* from amazement to euphoria and greatest hope for the future, then nose-diving to the realization of his imminent death, and climaxing in an "existential scream."

Milton sings his first extended solo passage in scene 7, having grasped—much earlier than the company owners—the problem arising from a clone that feels pain, develops feelings, and thinks independent thoughts. His long reflection shows him as a scientist vacillating between ambition and insecurity. A very different expressive range is asked for in the desperation aria he sings in scene 12 when the alarm sounds of the monitoring instruments seem to signal the death of his creature. In his final, shorter contribution, occurring toward the end of scene 13, he realizes that the mistake he made is systemic insofar as the genome donor's memory is reproduced in the clone. The result of this realization is a fairly unscientific rancor, a new color in the expressive repertoire of this engineer.

The fourth protagonist's stands out primarily for its one major solo passage: the eccentric aria in scene 8 that Widmann marks with the explicit heading "aria of the stock-market queen Patrizia." The 142-bar-long soliloquy spanning two-and-a-half octaves demands expressive nuances from the near-deranged stuttering of single syllables and quickly oscillating perfect-fifth glissandos via quasi-lyrical singing and screaming in the

highest register to stertorous breathing as if in an asthma attack. A large range of rasping and croaking sounds at the beginning of scene 13 and almost alluring vocalises in the sleep duet with Justine at the beginning of scene 11 complement this part with a panoply of additional colors.

The opera as a whole is convincing in the stringency of its layout as well as in the intelligent juxtaposition of lyrical, dramatic, and noise-based existentialist segments. The chamber-music-sized ensemble with its ever new color combinations and the effectively nuanced percussion emphasize the structure of the through-composed music in a way that is easy to follow and yet never disruptive. With this rich composition about the nature and essence of individuality, the social isolation of human beings under the pressure of profit seeking, and the failure of interpersonal communication and empathy, Widmann has succeeded in creating a work that has justly been honored as the most important operatic premiere of the 2003/2004 season. He manages to combine a critique of the ostensible omnipotence of modern science with ethical questions regarding human dignity and with reflections about the future development of humankind in a world that is increasingly dominated by technology and market concerns

It is to be hoped that this work will make it into the repertoire, a step so rare for contemporary operas. The scoring for a combination of only four vocal parts, which are very demanding but also distinctly rewarding, and an instrumental body of not much more than chamber-ensemble size¹⁷ could recommend this work also to opera studios and ambitious university opera departments.

¹⁷During the rehearsals for the 2010 premier of the revised version, Jörg Widmann and Axel Kober, the conductor at the Düsseldorf opera house, came to the conclusion that the originally very thin string section might benefit from some reinforcement. This would avoid the imbalance vis-a-vis the winds in louder passages and smooth the soft passages by replacing soloistic playing with the gentler choric pianissimo sound. The reinforcements did not, however, enter the material Schott Music is offering for hire. Questioned what his preference is in the early months of 2013, the composer told this author that both versions may be regarded as agreeable to him.

Babylon

The opulent opera *Babylon* was commissioned by the Bavarian State Opera. In contrast to *Das Gesicht im Spiegel*, written nine years earlier for the Munich Opera Festival, librettist and composer were this time not held to any restrictions, and they exploited this freedom enthusiastically. The result is a work scored for an instrumental body so large that in most theaters it will spill from the orchestral pit into the front balconies.¹⁸ With two choirs, fourteen singers in two vocal septets, eleven vocal soloists (including one boy soprano) and one speaking role, this cast is well equipped to present a lush and exceedingly multi-colored sound event.

The plot reinterprets the widespread cliché about the ancient city as a center of debauchery and a paradigm of human hubris expressed in the erection of a particularly high tower. Essential for its history, the dramatic action tells us, is not the ostensible result: the divine punishment, but its precondition: the fundamental experience of chaos and suffering in a world thrown out of joint after the great flood. This causes thoughtful humans to understand the necessity of a self-positing laws that will grant some degree of dependability. At the interface of chaos and pursued orderliness, the old and the new collide: an orgiastic, carnival-like New Year festival and the surviving belief that human sacrifice is inevitable for the appeasements of the gods contrast with the discovery of the figure seven as a structural principle of time and of myriad other aspects of this world. On the basis of this number and the order to be erected with seven as a guiding principle, the people of Babylon hope to seal a new covenant with their Gods.

¹⁸The 90-part orchestra consists of 29 wind players with 50 instruments (4 flutes [fls. 1 + 2 also piccolo, fl. 3 also piccolo or alto flutes, fl. 4 also piccolo or bass flutes], 4 oboes [ob. 2 also oboe d'amore, ob. 3 also English horn, ob. 4 also heckelphone], 4 clarinets [cl. 2 also E-flat clarinet, cl. 3 also bass clarinet, cl. 4 also contrabass clarinet], 4 bassoons [bsns. 3 + 4 also contrabassn.], 4 horns [all also natural horn], 4 trumpets, 4 trombones [trbs. 3 + 4. also bass or contrabass trombone], and 1 tuba), 52 strings (14 + 12 violins, 10 violas, 8 cellos, 8 double basses [4 of them with 5 strings]), 4 keyboard instruments (celesta, accordion, piano, and organ) and 2 harps as well as an extensive percussion with 4 players serving 45 different sound sources (glockenspiel, crotales, xylophone, vibraphone, tubular bells, plate bells, 3 hanging bronze plates, triangle, a pair of cymbals, 3 cymbals, 2 cup cymbals, 3 tamtams, water-tamtam, Chinese cymbal, nipple gongs, Peking opera gong, water gong, riq [Arabic jingle-drum], 2 tamborims, 2 bongos, Trinidad steel drums, small drum, 3 tomtoms, timpani, jazz drum set, large drum, large drum with cymbal, friction drum, metal chimes, water phone, rattle, maracas, castanets, claves, woodblocks, vibra slap, police whistle, whip, flexatone, lotus flutes, wind machine, thunder sheet, rain maker, and singing (wine) glasses). On stage: 7 shofars and 4 trumpets.

The representative of humankind in this mythical time of change is Tammu. He is torn between his Jewish background with its faith in the one God and his infatuation with the alluring Inanna, priestess to the goddess of the same name, the Babylonian “Venus.”¹⁹ She incorporates eroticism, the sensual love that is remorselessly free but at any moment undivided. Her female counterpart in the drama, the Soul, is bound to Tammu in Platonic love and alternately calls him her brother. She is a stranger in Babylon; this culture does not have the notion of a “soul.” The three leading protagonists thus act on three levels: on the dramatic level, which shows a human being exposed to the forces of pure and sensual love; on the mythical level, which maps the constellation onto the Babylonian world of gods and titans, and on the historical level of the Jewish salvation history and the monotheistic faith, which has to prove itself in exile.

In secondary rolls the Babylonian religion is impersonated by a priest, by the king who is considered the mundane manifestation of the creator-god Marduk, and by the death goddess Ereshkigal, sister and antithesis of Inanna. The culture of the Jewish community exiled in Babylon is represented by the prophet Ezekiel with the scribe whom he dictates his afflatus.

The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, author of the libretto, has chosen the number of operatic acts—which he calls “tableaux”—in accordance with the number seven that began to define everything in Babylonian culture in the epoch here evoked. He imagined these tableaux as gradually decreasing in time just as the terraced stories of a Babylonian ziggurat do in space.²⁰ His plot features life in a multi-cultural and multi-religious metropolis as it unfolds before the backdrop of various Sumerian-Akkadian myths, contrasted with some Jewish holy scriptures that are being written in this exile. The seven tableaux are framed by three smaller texted components: a prologue, an epilogue, and a scenic interlude after the intermission. The result is the following sequence of events²¹:

¹⁹Regarding the Sumerian-Akkadian pantheon, cf. the summary in appendix III.

²⁰The musical realization of the tableaux diverts only in one case from this specification: In the live recording of the premiere procured by the Bavarian Radio, act I has a playing time of 33½ minutes, act 2 follows with 26½ minutes, act 3 with 18 minutes, and act 4, concluding the first of two unequal halves, with 15 minutes. After the intermission and the interlude entitled “Babylon idyll: night music for hanging gardens” performed against a closed curtain there follow three tableaux with inconsistent shrinkage; 16 minutes (act 5), 22½ minutes (act 6) and less than 8 minutes (act 7).

²¹The complete libretto of the opera as provided in the program booklet prepared for the premiere is reprinted in appendix II, with kind permission of Munich’s National Theater .

- Prologue – “In Front of the Relics of the Walls of a Ruined City”: A scorpion-man curses the utopia of urban civilization. (In the *Gilgamesh Epic*, scorpion-men are the guardians of the tunnel through which the sun travels on her way between setting and rising. They are thus the only beings who know about the connection between ostensible demise and new beginning).
- Act I – “Within the Walls of Babylon”: The Soul feels abandoned by her “brother” Tammu since he succumbed to the spells of the beautiful Babylonian priestess Inanna. Tammu, who although a Jew has become the trusted friend of the King of Babylon and Inanna’s lover, feels like a border crosser. Inanna seeks to dispel his concerns. She gives him a drug that lets him see in a dream the affliction the city of Babylon has suffered and the truth of love.
- Act II – “Flood and Star Terror”: Dreaming, Tammu witnesses the great flood of Babylon. The Euphrates, normally a fount of fertility and life but now grown to an ocean, accuses Heaven of immoderateness. When the water level finally drops, the priest-king proclaims a new world order on the basis of a strict sacrificial practice.
- Act III – “The New Year Festival”: The Babylonians celebrate their annual orgiastic feast with processions, cabaret numbers, and carnival-like excesses. It gives them the freedom to mock with impudence even what is normally venerated (including the gods). The Jews fear God’s wrath against such blasphemy.
- Act IV – “At the Waters of Babylon”: Facing a gathering of exiled Jews, Ezekiel dictates what God inspires him to understand. At the end of the story about Noah’s salvation in the arch, he ventures a correction: Noah, he claims, had not sacrificed his son but animals, thereby heralding in a new phase in the relationship between humans and God. At this point in the dictation, a messenger of the Babylonian priest king arrives to inform Tammu that he has been elected as this year’s sacrifice to appease the city’s gods.
- Interlude – “Babylon Idyll, Night Music for Hanging Gardens”: The Soul meditates about the stars as signifiers of home.
- Act V – “The Feast of the Sacrifice”: As an intrinsic part of the New Year celebration, the Babylonian creation myth is reenacted on the festival ground in front of the tower. Meanwhile, a cube sinks down from heaven in which the priest king, although by now assailed with doubts about his task, will sacrifice Tammu. The Soul and Inanna feel united in their grief over the loss of their lover.

- Act VI – “Inanna in the Underworld”: Inanna decides to snatch Tammu from the grip of the death goddess. To this effect, she persuades her initially implacable sister to let her enter her realm, the underworld. On the way down she has to relinquish one after another all the insignia of her status, so that she arrives at the bottom of the underworld naked and seemingly powerless. Nonetheless she succeeds in convincing the death goddess, who has long felt exhausted from her always identical duties, that to allow an exception from her own laws would be the ultimate demonstration of her power. In the end she can guide Tammu up from the underworld and back into life.
- Act VII – “The New Rainbow”: The priest king, whose authority is forfeited when his sacrifice is revoked, must close a new deal with Heaven. Geared to the seven “planets” known to the Babylonians and the seven colors of the rainbow that God/the gods showed Noah/Utnapishtim after the deluge as a sign of a new covenant with humankind,²² this deal will rest on the number seven, whose symbol is to be the seven-day week. The mythical story ends when the Soul dissolves into light, Tammu and Inanna rise into other spheres, and the tower of Babylon collapses once again.
- Epilogue – “The constellation of the Scorpion”: Scrambling across the ruins of the wall, a scorpion-man meditates about his mission. By stinging himself, he multiplies and thereby soon fills every nook and cranny between the dead stones with new life.

Sloterdijk has designed the plot with its seven tableaux and their short framing sections as a collage of seven aspects. These are:

1. an imaginative picture of life in a multi-cultural metropolis,
2. Near-Eastern myths outlining life on earth and in heaven in the old scriptures: the *Enuma Elish*, the *Gilgamesh-Epos*,²³ and the Old-Testament books referring to the Jewish exile in Babylon,
3. the story of a human being who becomes a pawn in the hands of the gods—dearly loved by the priest-king and therefore chosen as a human sacrifice, desired by Inanna and therefore freed from the realm of death—and thus risks to lose his soul,

²²Sloterdijk transfers the rainbow mentioned in Genesis 9:13 as a symbol of the new covenant between God and Noah’s descendants onto the larger geographic area, on the basis that the Sumerians also claim a descent from Noah, whom they call Utnapishtim.

²³Cf. appendix III for a summary of the relevant myths and scriptures.

4. personifications of two natural forces characterizing cultural destruction and renewal: the scorpion-man and the Euphrates,
5. now mystical, now satirical allegorizations of various forces of influence, invariably appearing in the new Babylonian order of sevensomes: septets of planets and rainbow colors, of phalloi and vulvae, as well as septets of monkeys, whose truisms and impudent remarks show them to be representatives of the common people,
6. evocations of age-old rituals (the New Year sacrifice), a much-ridiculed superstition (the creation of the world from the dragon Tîamat), and the powerlessness of individual gods (the death-goddess's accommodation, attributed to her fatigue), as well as
7. manifestations of two divergent religions.

Widmann translates this template into a fascinating collage of his own. He conceives a little less than one third of the opera on the basis of self-quotations from fourteen ("two times seven") earlier works or movements of his. These self-quotations appear interwoven with new passages written for this opera. As in the earlier opera *Das Gesicht im Spiegel*, the vocal parts in *Babylon* are particularly impressive. Widmann has composed exceedingly demanding soprano parts for the two women competing for Tammu's love and attention, the Soul and Inanna. They are flanked with two other high voices whose allegorical personae lament the ostensibly divine destructions: the scorpion-man and the Euphrates.

The scorpion-man, whose role is sung by a counter-tenor, weeps in the prologue (with verses from the Old-Testament books of Joshua and Isaiah) about the insanity that makes humans want to build gigantic cities. His contours are made up of semi- and quartertone glissandos and melismas with numerous acciaccaturas, some of them in large interval leaps. The first two minutes of his lament, which he sings without any accompaniment, appear like the oppressively lonesome utterances of some calamity's sole survivor. Only gradually is his voice joined by instrumental sounds as if by some kind of non-vocal weeping. His singing remains soft and gets under any listener's skin. Only when the strings finally choose their own way with microtonal shifts does a transition to the dramatic action become possible. In the epilogue, the counter-tenor's interval spectrum is initially larger while the orchestra including tamtam, cymbal, plate bells, and trombone accents takes part in the drama. But when the scorpion-man bids farewell with Gottfried Benn's question "whence kindness and gentleness come," the orchestra retreats once again except for a clarinet and the accordion—Widmann's favorite combination for moments of painful intimacy.

The counterpole to this subdued but haunting lament is heard in act 2. The forces expressing grief here are the Euphrates (a dramatic mezzo-soprano), the planetary septet (seven solo singers—two sopranos, one alto, two tenors, one baritone, and one bass—singing in various polyphonic and homophonic textures, mostly without any instrumental backing), and the Babylonian choir. They are supported by an orchestra that presses every button known in the tradition of highly expressive romantic opera, from roaring *ffff* passages via multicolored percussive explosions, including the wind machine and other nature-imitating sounds.

Between the scorpion-man's soft weeping about the man-made disaster and the powerful accusation articulated by the great river and its residents regarding the catastrophe attributed to the gods' need for punishment, the first tableau presents the three principal protagonists in the manner of a classical exposition. The first to appear is the Soul who, feeling abandoned by her "brother," opens the opera's main body with yet another lament—one that will continue through the entire work. Then comes Tammu, facing the Soul's distress and voicing his own worries. When Inanna steps into the limelight, she does so with bird-like alluring vocalises. The tableau ends with a duet of Tammu und Inanna, which launches the dramatic action with a declaration of their love relationship and the initiation of Tammu's flood dream.

In this first tableau, which consists primarily of recitatives with rich orchestral padding, Widmann develops two melodic components that return in the final seventh tableau, thereby creating a second and third frame. Adjacent to the outermost frame, the one that is established dramaturgically by means of the scorpion-man's two solos in prologue and epilogue, Widmann has placed two soliloquies of the Soul.²⁴ Both contain a brief melodic phrase followed by a varied sequence, a combination that stands out from the surrounding melismatic syllables and glissandos owing to its consonant contour. After three violin entries, Tammu is the last to take up the figure in tableau 1 when he joins the Soul asserting that despite his love for the Babylonian priestess he will remain true to his people and its religion. In palindromic correspondence, the Soul sings the first entry in tableau 7, followed by several entries in the violins.²⁵

²⁴ *Babylon I*, mm. 1-157 and *Babylon VII*, mm. 126-141.

²⁵ Cf. act I, mm. 38-43 (violins), mm. 109/10 (violins), mm. 135/36 (violins in diminution) and mm. 211-215 (Tammu) with act VII, mm. 126-130 (the Soul), mm. 143-147 (violins) and mm. 154-156 (violins).

EXAMPLE 64: The Soul's call for her brother Tammu

act 1 [38]

act 7 [143]

Harmony and rhythm of the inwardly adjacent third framing component are even more strongly contrasted with the tonal language otherwise dominating these tableaux. It is the love song with which Inanna attempts to convince Tammu of the heartiness and uniqueness of their relationship. The song, which takes its text from the Old-Testament book of Ruth, recurs at the symmetrically analogous point in tableau 7 with very similar lyrics.²⁶ Owing to its melody, primarily made up of seconds and thirds, and the great number of similarly rhythmized measures, it almost invites us to sing along.

EXAMPLE 65: Inanna's love song

act 1 Lied (slowly rocking, hauntingly simple)

[539]

Wo du hingehst, dahin gehe auch ich. Und wo du bleibst, da bleibe ich auch. Denn dein Volk ist mein und dein Gott ist mein Gott. Denn wo du hin - gehst, dahin gehe auch ich. Und wo du bleibst, da bleibe ich auch.

The perspective of Babylonian history outlined in the above-mentioned sections is complemented in the central act 4. It focuses on the Jewish community, its self-assertion in exile through a written record of every divine afflatus, and its attempt at spiritual differentiation from the heathen Babylonians. In this setting the prophet Ezekiel, who flourished at the time of the Babylonian exile, becomes the indirect author of the story told in the book of Genesis about the deluge and God's new covenant with Noah.

²⁶Cf. act I, mm. 538-559, 569-591 with act VII, mm. 73-117.

For the Jewish community, Widmann has composed colorful choral passages replete with motifs that, while never identically repeated, are reminiscent of the turba segments in Bach's oratorios. Early in the tableau, the Jewish choir recites words transmitted from God through Ezekiel to the scribe, who reads them in *Sprechstimme*. In these passages the singing evolves in protracted note repetitions imitating speech rhythm. The parts of the sixty singers are often written out individually here, so much do they differ from one another. In the absence of any instrumental accompaniment, the choir itself provides both the melodic foreground and a kind of backdrop.²⁷ At the end of the tableau's first half, the choir has a different role when it reflects on its prophet's dictation by repeating God's own words ("Never again will I curse the earth"). The note repetition, chordally set as before, now moves without any hint of a supporting basis.

Other passages in the central tableau are marked by melodic figures. A recalcitrant-sounding motif, whose large leaps in repeatedly changing direction recall an erratic flash of lightning, characterizes vocal and instrumental parts in segments that address God's vengefulness.²⁸

EXAMPLE 66: God's punishment for the unfaithful human race

13 *Agitato*

vom Menschen bis zum Kriechtier

Men - - schen, den ich geschaffen vom Erdboden ver - til - gen, vom Menschen bis

Ich will den (Jüdischer Chor, Tenöre)

vom Menschen bis

A second melodic figure links Tammu's criticism of Ezekiel's version of the deluge, which owing to his dream experience he suspects of having been copied from Babylonian books, to the words of the Babylonian messenger who announces that Tammu is this year's appeasement sacrifice

²⁷ Cf. act IV, mm. 1-10: ten sopranos, six altos, and four tenors sing independent parts, while another eight sopranos, eight altos, eight tenors, and all sixteen basses hum a ten-part accompaniment.

²⁸ The contour, mostly restricted to four tones, is taken up by Tammu (mm. 27/28 "Um Himmels Willen") and imitated by the bassoons (mm. 35-38). When Tammu, doubled by two violas, later exclaims "O Schande über Israel" (mm. 53-54), he uses an extended version which is in turn imitated by the clarinets (mm. 55-59). When he accuses Ezekiel of having copied the account of the flood from Babylonian books, his reproach sounds in an extremely wide-spaced variant of the motif (m. 72: "Prophet! Prophet!"). After the Jews have learned in the tableau's second segment that Tammu has been chosen as this year's human sacrifice, their staggered call "O wenn wir fliehen könnten" (m. 208) uses the same figure.

to the gods. At this junction exactly in the middle of the central tableau the old order, in which the gods were interpreted as requiring if not actually demanding human sacrifice, transitions into the new order, in which only animals will be ritually slaughtered (a decree Sloterdijk's Ezekiel attributes to Noah). For Tammu, Widmann composes three-note groups rising in dotted rhythm. Each group is diatonic, but their transposition in the course of longer contours resists any definite tonal anchoring.²⁹ The messenger's boy soprano alternates tonally similar three-note groups distinguished by syncopated dotting with rising fourths in dotted rhythm.

EXAMPLE 67: Melodic consonance in the context of human sacrifice

Act 4 **Pesante**

60



8
Tammu: was von der großen Flut, die da - mals ü - - - ber A - - - dams Kin - der kam?

Act 4 **Poco pesante**

149



Herald: Zum Tempel soll ich dich ge - lei - ten, mit all den Ehren, die dem Heiligen ge - büh - ren. Be -
krän-zen sol - len wir dein Haupt

In this central tableau, the orchestra is enriched with additional colors. When it supports the Jewish community's singing, the woodwinds are complemented not only with the additional members of the oboe family but also with alto and bass flutes. Particularly noteworthy is the use of the organ, which elsewhere in the opera participates only rarely and exclusively from the space behind the stage. The context is significant. In presenting the story of Noah's salvation from the flood, Sloterdijk has taken the liberty to frame the verse from Genesis 8:20 as a correction the prophet Ezekiel undertakes under the impression of the human sacrifice about to be carried out in connection with the Babylonian New Year rituals. The entry of the organ precisely at the moment when the prophet Ezekiel, haunted by pangs of conscience, dictates a tale purged of the human sacrifice allegedly

²⁹When the prophet dictates his afflatus regarding the flood to his scribe, Tammu interrupts him with the accusation: "What have you seen, after all, of the *abubu*?" (referring to the flood monster the Babylonians considered as a symbol of the deluge).

intended earlier,³⁰ reinforces the sacred significance of this moment. It makes the event look like a caesura in religious history that will far outreach the Babylonian-Jewish context. Immediately after this pregnant moment, four Babylonian trumpeters arrive, preparing with their fanfare the appearance of the herald who comes to induce the sacrifice.

The religious subject matter is most succinctly translated into music in the scenic interlude that precedes the shorter second half of the opera. The choir, articulating God's voice from behind the stage, announces God's new covenant with humankind, in words that paraphrase verses from the Old-Testament Book of Amos ("I rejoice in love, not in the blood of sacrifices, I delight in the cognition of God, not in the smoke of fires"), while the Soul, singing an intimate duet with a clarinet, interprets the stars as signs that call humans to their true homeland ("wide, high, magnificent, yonder, free").

The most fascinating layer in the remaining tableaux are, surprisingly, Widmann's self-quotations. Owing to their respective hermeneutic baggage, each of them speaks a distinct language, thus relating essential moments of the plot to questions that have haunted the composer in the course of the preceding years.

The orchestral backdrop for the destiny of humans who become a plaything of the gods comes from *Teufel Amor*,³¹ an orchestral composition premiered half a year before *Babylon*. Roughly half of its score makes its way into the opera, divided according to the Babylonian number into seven segments. The quotations accompany both Tammu's individual fate and humankind's suffering as a result of the deluge, which happened long before the time of the Jewish exile in Babylon. In the second tableau, Tammu "witnesses" the momentous flood under the impact of Inanna's magic potion. The first self-quotation, marked "heavily booming," serves here as a musical presentation of hell which in Babylon merges with the

³⁰Cf. Genesis 8:20 "Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it" with the wording in the libretto: *The scribe*: You wanted, I think, to tell of Noah's serious gratitude for his salvation and that of the creatures. When, slowly and terribly and acquiescently, he lays out holy knives and leads the trembling victim, his son, to the altar, then you suddenly fell to the ground, pallid, and were unable to hear or see. [...] So how am I to go on writing? What kind of a sacrifice did Noah carry out when he lifted the holy knife and when the brushwood was ablaze? — *Ezekiel*: Write then, in the name of God: "Noah took of all the clean animals and sacrificed them as burnt offerings."

³¹On the possible story and the music of this orchestral composition see the final section of the first chapter in this book, pp. 55-63.

cataclysm. Widmann paints this catastrophe with overwhelming orchestral power, in which the vocal descriptions and expressions of indignation uttered by the Euphrates and the laments of the Babylonian people about the wholesale destruction of their world threaten to be submerged.³² A little later, when the Babylonians reproach Heaven in motet-like texture for its incomprehensible immoderateness, Widmann chooses from the precursor work a rather conciliatory passage, which has its origin even before *Teufel Amor* in *Lied für Orchester*.³³

Tableau 5, in which Tammu is sacrificed to the Babylonian gods, begins and ends with passages from *Teufel Amor*. Both the 43-measure prelude, which in the precursor work similarly translates the ominous menace at the outset of the assumed poetic tale into haunting sound,³⁴ and the 34-measure postlude with music that, in *Teufel Amor*, uses wild noises to depict the turmoil before the hymnic union of the unequal lovers, are imported here without any vocal enrichment.³⁵ This changes when the latter quotation continues into the beginning of tableau 6: the music from *Teufel Amor* now accompanies the septet of phalloi who reproach the goddess of death for her inexorability.³⁶ Much later in the same underworld scene the subsequent passage from *Teufel Amor* (which resonates with the defraudation and exploitation inherited from *Das Gesicht im Spiegel*) underlies Inanna's negotiation with the goddess of death about the longed-for exception by which Tammu's death is to be rescinded.³⁷ Between the two passages one finds yet another quotation from the same work: The central third of the tableau begins with music from the conclusion of *Teufel Amor*—showing the devil, having come out on the short end, exit snorting with rage. Similarly the goddess of death already lost her game when she allowed Inanna (and with her, Love) to enter her realm.³⁸

³² *Babylon* II, mm. 195-207 ≈ *Teufel Amor* mm. 324-336. (This passage in *Teufel Amor* is in turn developed from an orchestral interlude in Widmann's earlier opera, which laments the exploitation of a human being (albeit a cloned one); cf. *Teufel Amor* mm. 324-331 with *Das Gesicht im Spiegel*, scene 12, mm. 282-289.)

³³ *Babylon* II, mm. 376-406 ≈ *Teufel Amor* mm. 454-484 (*Lied für Orchester* mm. 120-150).

³⁴ *Babylon* V, mm. 1-43 ≈ *Teufel Amor* mm. 8-50.

³⁵ *Babylon* V, mm. 359-392 ≈ *Teufel Amor* mm. 165-198.

³⁶ *Babylon* VI, mm. 1-58 ≈ *Teufel Amor* mm. 199-259.

³⁷ *Babylon* VI, mm. 320-365 ≈ *Teufel Amor* mm. 264-309 (*Babylon* VI, mm. 354-365 corresponds to a segment in the orchestral interlude at the end of scene 12 of *Das Gesicht im Spiegel*).

³⁸ *Babylon* VI, mm. 104-130 ≈ *Teufel Amor* mm. 509-535.

The orchestral work about human powerlessness in the face of the potentially diabolical is last heard in tableau 7. This is a passage from the final portion of *Teufel Amor* in which the musically intimated story ultimately seems to give human love a chance. The excerpt accompanies lines that appear like a summary in telegram style of the lesson informing the operatic action: the choir sings simply, “Babylon, the flood and Love,” while the Soul challenges Tammu: “Learn to live, learn to be!”³⁹

In three long passages from his *Messe für großes Orchester* Widmann transfers tenets from the monotheistic to the polytheistic religion. Each passage emerges in a vocally enriched and reframed development. When the Babylonians invoke their gods immediately after the prologue in which the scorpion-man laments the city’s renewed destruction, we hear the complete “Introitus.”⁴⁰ The instrumental lines, matched in the score of *Messe* to the syllables of “Kyrie eleison” that the players are mentally to “recite,” are heard here as a backing for the choir’s powerful singing in up to 21 different parts as the people living next to the Euphrates beg their gods to spare them from further disasters. The transference of the call for divine mercy from the one God of Christianity to the many gods of Babylon thus unites humanity, despite its division into various religions, in the fundamentally human gesture of the appeal for clemency.

In the center of tableau 5, the city prepares for the sacrifice of Tammu. After the priest has reassured himself that Babylon’s king is worthy of carrying out the rite of atonement, he mandates him with these solemn words: “Do, o Lord, what your power demands, bring the offering to the altar! Deflect the flood and its horrors from the peoples for all times.” The distraught Jews react by entrusting their destiny as a people banished from its land to their God. A little later the Babylonians join their invocation: they praise Ninurta, their god of water and war, in the hope that he will henceforth protect them against floods and other catastrophes. The instrumental backdrop Widmann chooses for this multi-layered web of a priest’s consecration, a call for clemency, and a praise intended as appeasement is the music known from the *Gloria* of his Mass, a music associated with what in the liturgical sequence of the Ordinary links the call for mercy with the supplication for “peace on earth.”⁴¹ There follows the subsequent section in Widmann’s *Messe*, Contrapunctus III, to the accompaniment of which the Jews of Babylon decry their fate in complex vocal polyphony.

³⁹ *Babylon* VII, mm. 139-160 ≈ *Teufel Amor* mm. 380-401.

⁴⁰ *Babylon* I, mm. 1-58 ≈ *Messe* mm. 1-58 (also: mm. 16-53 ≈ *Chor* mm. 321-358).

⁴¹ *Babylon* V, mm. 172-239 ≈ *Messe* mm. 353-424.

This section, in *Messe* an abstract (non-liturgical) contrast preceding the *Crucifixus*, thus underscores here, in the operatic context, the sacrifice of Tammu, which the Jews of Babylon oppose by reminding themselves that even Noah thanked God by sacrificing animals. Once again Widmann's music stresses the parallel between different religions, their hidden unity underneath any visible diversity.⁴²

The third quotation from *Messe* is inserted at the end of tableau 6, beginning in the operatic score under the heading "Auferstehungsmusik" (Resurrection music). The passages Widmann recalls here are *Et Resurrexit* and *Exodus*, the last sections of *Messe*.⁴³ The music underlies the words Ereshkigal speaks while Inanna leads Tammu back from the underworld after he has been released from death. This release can be perceived as another kind of "Resurrection" and "Exodus." Since the quoted music abruptly breaks off before the triumphant final chord of *Messe*, we are asked to understand that this "resurrection" leads back into earthly life without promising any kind of eschatological redemption.

The music transferred from the Christian context onto the Babylonian people and pantheon is complemented on the level of natural religion by two self-quotations from a work for solo flute and orchestral groups. Widmann entrusts these to the allegories of the enlivened sky, the septets of planets and of rainbow colors, and to their philosophical acceptance of fate. The first of these insets is found toward the end of tableau 2. The mighty Euphrates is exhausted after its powerful accusation of Heaven. In alternation with the planetary septet, the river ends its lament with the words: "Murdered to extinction ... Woe to the world after the flood," while the music closes a frame around the main body of this tableau. Before the priest king enters and announces that his task is to "impede disaster, walk on just ways, comfort everything that lives, be a good legislator" as well as "talk to the gods and be the king whose healing shadow spreads out over the land," the orchestra, entering into the planetary septet's fading "*Arki abubu*" (after the deluge), sets in with an excerpt from Widmann's *Flûte en suite* of 2011. Under the heading "Solemn (greatest possible contrast between the slow 'Pesante' chorale and the dancelike-ironic 'chorale' of the 3 piccolo flutes") the instruments recall the entire fifth movement of the suite.⁴⁴ The singular abruptness of the alternation between two very different tempos sounds striking in the precursor work, where it is not

⁴² *Babylon* V, mm. 240-255 ≈ *Messe* mm. 425-440.

⁴³ *Babylon* VI, mm. 455-507 / 508-529 ≈ *Messe* mm. 569-627 / 628-643.

⁴⁴ *Babylon* II, mm. 495-517 ≈ "V. Choral II" from *Flûte en suite*, mm. 1-23.

related to any story. In the opera, the *pesante* of the solo flute's chorale phrase and the repeatedly interrupting *più mosso subito* interjections of the tercet of piccolos seem to depict the unstable mental condition of the people that has been so harshly buffeted by catastrophe.

The second excerpt from the same suite is inserted not long after the beginning of tableau 7. In this case, the solo voice and the vocal septet do not fade away but juxtapose the instrumental quotation with a layer of their own. The Soul summons Tammu, recently reemerged from the realm of death: "Carry on your head a wreath of hour blossoms" Tammu objects by saying that "the flood is never over," and the rainbow septet sings about the number seven as the basis of a new temporal order. Accompanying this web of claims, the orchestra plays the first 18 measures from the "Venetian Gondola Song," the sixth movement in *Flûte en suite*.⁴⁵ The Babylonians are to imagine their life henceforth like the calm rocking of a gondola, in that "day follows day in firmly established sequence."

Babylon's raucous once-a-year revelry apparently reminds Widmann of his hometown Munich and its idiosyncratic festivals. The corresponding music, which dominates large portions of tableaux 3 and 6, is taken from three interrelated work. Its ancestors are the two framing movements in the suite *Dubairische Tänze*, "Zwiefacher" and "Marsch."⁴⁶ These two movements are interrelated: The five-bar introduction of "Zwiefacher," a popular preamble of almost every Bavarian barn-dance, becomes (in transposition) the center of "Marsch," where Widmann embeds it in an interleaving of the initial measures of *Bayerischer Defiliermarsch* (a ceremonial march played to this day, sounding quite drunken here with semitonally displaced winds and strings) and the characteristic incipit of a popular song, "Mir san die lustigen Holzhackerbuam" (Bavarian dialect for "We are the cheerful lumberjack boys"). The persistent tempo instability is highly unusual for a march though: extended accelerandos are suddenly thwarted, *Meno mosso* and *Presto subito* often alternate measure by measure.

⁴⁵*Babylon VII*, mm. 12-28 ≈ "VI. Venetian Gondola Song" from *Flûte en suite*, mm. 2-18.

⁴⁶In 2009 the Siemens Arts Program gave Widmann a one-month grant for a stay in Dubai. The idea was that the metropolis on the Persian Gulf would inspire him to a new composition. He comments this experience as follows: "My one-month stay in Dubai prompted me to ask myself where I am coming from, musically. Just as one may feel drawn to distant places while at home, one must possibly go to distant places in order to discover where one's home is. My answer—be it consequence, substrate, or counter question—was *Dubairische Tänze* ['Dubavarian dances'; the adjective is a pun of Dubai and 'bayrisch']. The movements of the suite are I. Zwiefacher, II. Valse mécanique, III. Wiegenlied, IV. Jeux d'eaux, V. Valse bavaroise, VI. Schlaflied, VII. Ländler, VIII. Vier Strophen, and IX. Marsch.

The “March” from *Dubairische Tänze*, originally scored for small ensemble, was reinforced vertically in 2010 on its way into the orchestral composition *Souvenir bavarois*, which was in turn expanded horizontally in 2011 (gaining a significantly more substantial contrasting section and a much weightier new ending) to become *Bayerisch-Babylonischer Marsch*. In the opera *Babylon* the two orchestral works recur in segmented form, shedding an interesting light on the parallel between the two metropolises separated so drastically in time and space. The segments, originally pure instrumental music, are overwhelmingly used here to accompany the choir and the soloists’ boisterous exclamations. Additional sources for tableaux 3 and 6 are a longer passage from “Zwiefacher,” the suite’s opening, and excerpts from the two subsequent movements, “Valse mécanique” and “Wiegenlied.” The quotations in *Babylon* stemming from *Dubairische Tänze* or its successor works thus also amount to the Babylonian number seven.

In tableau 3, the above-mentioned introduction to “Zwiefacher”—the germ cell that links the movement to “Marsch” and its descendants—undergoes an unexpected metamorphosis (traced in Example 68 below). After Inanna has invited the colorful crowd to join in the revelry, chumming up to the simpler-minded with a fairground-style “Come on in, we give you the whole world,” which is bolstered by the Babylonian choir’s cheerful “bambaram dadam,” the germ cell’s E-major version serves the drunken Babylonians as a basis for the staple of Bavarian beer-drinking singsong: “u—Oans, zwoa, g’suffa” (w—One, two, drink up).⁴⁷ Seven monkeys sing a swing accompanied by syncopated finger-snapping and banter with Inanna about the likely thief of a missing coconut. Inanna ridicules the god Marduk’s substandard creation and encourages the revelers to join in all manner of shenanigans.⁴⁸ A little later the germ cell of “Zwiefacher,” now in the original G-major/minor version, underlies a joint satire on the creator-god (“he created a universe for himself as best he could”).⁴⁹ When a furious prophet Ezekiel demands that the exuberant crowd be quiet, the people limit themselves for a brief moment to finger-snapping before they rekindle their mockery of Marduk.⁵⁰ The saucier Inanna and the excited Babylonians become, the more desperate do the Jews sound in

⁴⁷ *Babylon* III, mm. 165-243 ≈ *Bayerisch-babylonischer Marsch* mm. 1-79; a segment will be taken up later in the same tableau to a new text, cf. mm. 208-217 with 597-606.

⁴⁸ *Babylon* III, mm. 297-422 ≈ *Bayerisch-babylonischer Marsch* mm. 80-205.

⁴⁹ *Babylon* III, mm. 439-462 ≈ *Dubairische Tänze*, “Zwiefacher” mm. 1-24.

⁵⁰ *Babylon* III, mm. 473-544 and 561-585 ≈ *Dubairische Tänze*, “Valse mécanique” mm. 2-60 / 94-101 and 102-128.

their struggle for pious demonstrations of humility. The blasphemy of the creator-god in particular appalls them. When the orchestra once again intones the E-major transposition of the five-bar unit, the pious expatriates defy the implicit invitation of the music in word and melody. Instead, the reassure themselves and one another that the Lord will comfort Zion.

EXAMPLE 68: The “germ cell” of the Zwiefacher, heard three times in *Babylon*

Zwiefacher (hearty, sturdy)

Babylon (act 3, from 6 bars before rehearsal number 22)

pp *p* *sfz* *sfz*

U Oans, zwoa, g'suf - - fa

(Babylonian choir)

p *sf* *sf* *sf* *sf* *sf*

(Bläser + Streicher)

(act 3, from the bar before rehearsal number 44)

f

So gut er kann - - te, schuf er sich ein All.

f

Babylon (act 3, from 3 bars after rehearsal number 60)

sfz *sub* *fff* *fff* *fff*

Der Herr er trös - tet Si - on

(Jewish choir, male voices only)

p *sf* *fff* *fff* *fff* *f*

(Bläser + Streicher)

p *sf* *fff* *fff* *fff* *fff*

The carnival-like atmosphere in tableau 3 provides Babylonians with psychological relief in preparation for the imminent ritual of human sacrifice. In tableau 6, the Bavarian music functions similarly as a kind of emotional compensation during Inanna's descent to the underworld from where she seeks to rescue Tammu. When Inanna arrives at the gates of the underworld and asks to be admitted, her words express respect for the ruler of the irrecoverable, but this respect is counteracted by her music. Neither does the septet of phalloi take the weary goddess of death too seriously, as their orchestral accompaniment makes very clear.⁵¹

The ultimate release of the sacrificed Tammu is achieved by means of a lullaby Inanna sings most soothingly. The tune stems from Widmann's *Étude* No. VI for violin solo. This work, which the composer wrote for his sister, the violinist Carolin Widmann, to greet the birth of her first child, consists of a simple theme with 24 variations. A modified and expanded version of the penultimate variation accompanies Inanna's singing as she steps in front of her sister Ereshkigal, divested of all her insignia. A single violin is heard ornamenting the words in which the mighty Inanna placates the weak goddess of death by professing her alleged submission to the laws of the underworld.⁵²

EXAMPLE 69: Inanna's gesture of submission in front of Ereshkigal

Einfach (♩ = 132)
(humble, chaste)

Inanna
Arm muss ich sein vor dir. So

solo violin

Inanna
leg ich auch den Gürtel

solo violin

⁵¹*Babylon* VI, mm. 65-103 ≈ *Souvenir bavaois* mm. 60-99.

⁵²*Babylon* VI, mm. 197-217 and 233-236 ≈ *Étude* VI for violin solo, "Wiegenlied für Salome," variation 23, mm. 1-21 and 22-25.

Blustering into a momentous fury over her helplessness, the goddess of death is soon reduced to choked speech with meaningless consonant clusters. At this junction, Widmann quotes—in a passage tellingly marked “Lullaby for death”—the entire “Wiegenlied” movement from *Dubairische Tänze*. Bolstered by this lulling music, which almost drowns out Ereshkigal’s continuing chain of angry noises, Inanna cunningly suggest ways in which she might alleviate her sister’s state of exhaustion.⁵³

Three times in the course of the opera, each time in the context of rituals passed down through history, the composer recalls *Antiphon*, an orchestral work composed in 2008, from which he quotes the principal theme and its development. In the center of tableau 4, the eight-measure fanfare theme, a four-trumpet signal with menacing reverberations in the percussion, announces the royal herald who has come to greet Tammu, full of respect for the human chosen to appease the gods⁵⁴ (Ex. 70). In tableau 5, a passage based on the same thematic material is heard while the king is attired in the ritual vestments and adorned with the concomitant insignia.⁵⁵

The third passage recalled from this orchestral composition begins with a complex segment conceived in thematic contrast to the fanfare. Falling staccato runs in the low winds and strings are embedded in harmonics sonorities but interrupted by bongo and tamborim rolls. A powerful outbreak is followed by a moment of silence filled with nothing but soft drum rolls, before the brass instruments, returning to the fanfare material, initiate a powerful *crescendo ed accelerando*. The climax of this increase, marked *Feroce* and resplendently reinforced with tubular bells and nipple gongs, gives way first to a *Pesante* and soon thereafter to a *Molto calmo subito*. In the opera, the entire array just described accompanies a segment of the plot that is acted out without any vocal participation. A black cube, at first seen hovering in the sky, sinks down on Babylon. It will subsequently serve as both altar and sacrificial chamber. The king walks toward it, hesitates briefly as he faces the act whose wisdom he evidently doubts, but then visibly pulls himself to order and proceeds to perform what he knows is expected of him. The sacrificial killing is concealed from everyone’s eyes, carried out inside the mysterious cube. When the cube subsequently glides up and away, it leaves Tammu lying motionless on the ground.⁵⁶

⁵³ *Babylon VI*, mm. 279-313 ≈ *Dubairische Tänze*, “Wiegenlied” mm. 1-35.

⁵⁴ *Babylon IV*, mm. 138-145 ≈ *Antiphon* mm. 1-8.

⁵⁵ *Babylon V*, mm. 263-272 ≈ *Antiphon* mm. 262-271.

⁵⁶ *Babylon V*, mm. 273-321 ≈ *Antiphon* mm. 177-225.

EXAMPLE 70: The fanfare theme from *Antiphon*

act 4
 138 **Vivace, brillante** (♩ = 112)
fff con tutta la forza sempre stacc.

trumpet 1
 trumpet 2
 trumpet 3
 trumpet 4
 (4 trumpeters in Babylonian attire on stage)

fff con tutta la forza sempre stacc.

fff con tutta la forza

fff con tutta la forza

Tranquillo, subito (♩ = 50)

senza misura (ca. 30")

timpani
 low tomtom
 low tomtom

Two segments from Widmann's concert overture *Con brio* appear integrated into the fifth tableau. This work had been commissioned in 2008 by the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra whose conductor, Mariss Jansons, stipulated that the composition should refer to musical characteristics of Beethoven's 7th and 8th symphonies. Widmann implemented this,

as he recalls, by seeking to spark a “Beethovenian stir and rhythmic pressure.”⁵⁷ In the opera, a passage from *Con brio* underlies the ritual reenactment of the world’s creation from the jaws of the primeval dragon Tiāmat, with which the king opens the sacrificial feast.⁵⁸ The excerpt opens with dark air sounds produced in the 28-part wind section and then uses vocalises of the united choirs with spasmodic chord-repetition crescendos to gain height and intensity. Later in the same tableau, an extensive segment similarly dominated by chord repetitions underscores the singing of Babylonians and Jews with which they jointly praise the overarching unity of gods and peoples that is expected at a future time when heaven and earth will strive toward each other.⁵⁹

Zweites Labyrinth, another orchestral composition from recent years (2006) in which scattered little figures embark on erratic paths only to leave them again soon thereafter, is quoted only once in *Babylon*, in an *Agitato* passage toward the end of tableau 6. Initially consisting exclusively of unpitched noises,⁶⁰ the borrowed music paints a sonic picture of the defeat of the goddess of death. “With a brutish expression and bared teeth” she chooses the backdrop of this soundscape to disgorge toward her sister Inanna: “You have given me lust for madness. The exception . . . , you shall have it!” The last words, which Widmann specifies should be “roared as if by a bull,” coincide with the *sffffz* accent of a fully chromatic cluster heard at this point in *Zweites Labyrinth*.⁶¹

A last self-quotation is heard in the opera’s closing measures, a segment separated from the rest of the epilogue by means of the heading “swan song.” The scorpion-man has been quoting Gottfried Benn with the epode of a poem in the form of a Pindaric ode. In the “swan song” he has reached the concluding words, which are strangely appropriate for the

⁵⁷Widmann quoted after the work commentary published by Schott Music.

⁵⁸*Babylon* V, mm. 60-71 ≈ *Con brio* mm. 84-95.

⁵⁹*Babylon* V, mm. 74-97 ≈ *Con brio* mm. 165-188.

⁶⁰In this passage, which was partially re-orchestrated for integration into the opera, four piccolo flutes play unsynchronized slow quarter-tone glissandos against the plectrum glissandos that the two harps set against each other in contrary motion. Soon thereafter, the brass instruments join with “tukutuku” air-noise trills. Yet another measure later, four oboes, four clarinets and four bassoons underscore the 16th-note rhythm with key clicks. Behind all this, individual cellos and basses produce a rather macabre-sounding trill on the tail gut behind their instruments’ bridges. Only when, at the climax of an *accelerando*, the accordion adds brief figures (*staccatissimo* and in “extreme dynamics”), do winds and strings one after the other return to the realm of tones.

⁶¹*Babylon* VI, mm. 435-451 ≈ *Zweites Labyrinth* mm. 156-172.

situation (“ . . . must now go”).⁶² The music corresponds in all details to that concluding the epilogue of the opera *Das Gesicht im Spiegel*.⁶³ The accordion’s three-part texture and the clarinet’s cantilena perform a poly-rhythmic ascent into the highest spheres, as if to hint at a continuation of the story on a loftier level. In both cases, the devastating experience that what one loves has been lost is contrasted with the knowledge of one’s own indestructibility—scant consolation in such a situation. In the earlier opera it is the disconcerting genetic programming of the human clone’s self-regenerating body that precludes suicide even in times of utter despair; the counterpart in *Babylon* is the scorpion-man’s act of self-cloning, as a result of which his copies will soon populate all the nooks and crannies of the ruined city’s debris. Widmann does not reveal whether his music seeks to counteract the bleakness at the conclusion of both plots with a hope for continued life and rebirth.

Babylon presents itself as an example of consistent polystylism with perfect transitions from one tonal idiom into the next. The method is far from arbitrary eclecticism. Every musically manifested color is associated with a particular level predefined in the plot. The result is a fascinating kaleidoscope of serious and light fragments. The reviews of the premiere give the impression that many critics believe to remember a much greater portion of cabaret music including jazz, pop, and musical tunes than are actually to be found in the opera. Of course, irony and parody brand themselves on the memory with greater ease, particularly as they usually come with provocative words and conspicuous gestures. And since Widmann is restrained by neither fear nor reserve when matching entertaining scenes with music reminiscent of popular genres, music normally allowed to enter “great opera” only in stylistically purged and idiomatically adapted form, many an advocate of high art may feel irritated. Admittedly, not all eccentricities in the libretto and the music are equally enriching and unstintingly conducive to the opera’s success.⁶⁴ But in all the laughter or outrage about

⁶²Gottfried Benn, “Menschen getroffen” (People met). In: *Gesammelte Werke I: Gedichte* (München: dtv, 1975), 321. The final verse, with which the scorpion-man concludes the drama, translates as: “I have often asked myself, and never found an answer, where meekness and goodness come from, don’t know it to this day, and must now go.”

⁶³*Babylon* Nachspiel, mm. 183-205 ≈ *Das Gesicht im Spiegel* XVI, mm. 70-92.

⁶⁴Thus Juan Martin Koch in *Neue Musikzeitung* rightly criticizes “the pseudo-whimsical tone setting of the septets of the vulvas and phalloi with steeldrum and piccolo screams” (“Die Zaubrerflöte für das 21. Jahrhundert ist noch zu schreiben: *Babylon* von Jörg Widmann und Peter Sloterdijk an der Münchner Staatsoper,” NMZ Online, 10/28, 2012).

monkey cancan and Bavarian ribaldry it is too easy to miss the psychological purpose of these components.

The opera is thematically determined by humankind's primeval conflicts: the tragedy of an earthly life shot through with suffering and loss, the contradiction between an order sought both in the world and in the relationship to the gods and the chaos of catastrophes cyclically breaking into this order. Humanity comes to see itself as a plaything of gods, nature, and cosmos, and feels correspondingly helpless and desperate. The effort to tackle this conflict-laden situation engenders above all two attitudes: religion, which with its rites and commandments promises to reduce the god's putative wrath and punitive catastrophes, and a sporadic repression of the sense of contingency in zones permitting burlesque behavior. In the center of the opera, the Babylonian New Year festival with its carnival-like friskiness, ritual reenactment of the creation myth handed down through generations, and longed-for appeasement of the gods by means of a human sacrifice combines all the elements of this tension.

A major portion of the music is taken up by expressions of grief, laments over curses and afflictions of epic proportion. In their vocal and instrumental scoring and their dynamic intensity these laments span from the very soft and sparse to tone pictures bordering on the exorbitant. This becomes immediately evident when one recalls decisive moments of the opera with the aim of reassessing them under the angle of pain and anxiety: The scorpion-man, lonesome and either deprived of any accompaniment or with his voice hovering over painfully protracted sustained sonorities, mourns the madness of a human society he perceives as vain and megalomaniac. The mythical man Tammu fears that he may be losing himself in his sensual longing for Inanna and feels incredulous horror at the wrath of God as he sees him in the deluge meted out as punishment. Inanna, grieving over the lover whom the Babylonians have ritually sacrificed, objects with powerful laments when the goddess of death maintains her intransigence although she threatens to suffocate under her task. The Babylonian people as a communal voice together with the personified Euphrates moan mightily under the incomprehensible cruelty of the gods and the shocking destructions brought about by the great flood. The exiled Jewish community perceives Yahweh as unrelenting insofar as He does not seem willing to end their forced stay in a region whose people worship other gods.

The most persistent lament is that of the Soul. Hardly has the first tableau opened than she weeps about the apostasy of her "brother" Tammu under the presumably corruptive influence of a beguiling heathen priestess. In the opera's center she worries, singing in tender duet with a solo

clarinet, about humankind in general, seemingly trapped in earth's dust and without knowledge of its true spiritual home. At the end of the seventh tableau she finally has no choice than to relinquish Tammu and accompany him with her mourning.

All these passages are united by Widmann's sure feeling for a subtly nuanced orchestration, for the emotional language of harmonizations in which a sudden consonance may sound more disturbing than any shrill dissonance, and for the expressive power of vocal contours with often extreme intervals and rhythms. Not without reason does the music critic Alexander Dick ask admiringly: "When was the last time that a composer has so unselfconsciously—and masterfully—posed himself the question of melody?"⁶⁵

This great canvas deals with mythos and immoderateness—immoderateness both on the side of humans and on that of the gods. Tammu and Inanna symbolize culturally defined, contrary attitudes: he believes that humans participate in a beyond by means of an immortal soul, she is convinced that death can be outsmarted and humans be brought back into earthly life. The relationship between these two protagonists thus encapsulates a symbolic representation of Babylon's divergent peoples and religions. By contrast, their quasi private love story takes up much less space than many in the audience are retrospectively willing to admit,⁶⁶ and has no causal connection to the larger questions informing this work. The summary impression is that of an ambitious music-dramatic thematization in the surprising guise of an opulent "grand opera."

⁶⁵Alexander Dick, "Bayrilonisches Sprachengewirr. Musiktheater der Maßlosigkeit: Jörg Widmanns and Peter Sloterdijks Oper *Babylon* in München," *Badische Zeitung*, 29 October 2012.

⁶⁶Neither Tammu nor Inanna are seen or heard of in the prologue, the interlude, and the postlude. In tableaux 2 and 3, the deluge and the Babylonian New Year festival, Tammu appears as a time-traveling observer and a foreign guest respectively only in the framing segments. In tableaux 4 and 5, featuring the Jewish community pondering their exile and the Babylonians performing their ritual sacrifice, Inanna is seen on stage only briefly before each tableau ends. Not until tableaux 6 and 7 with Tammu's abduction from the underworld and the couple's reiterated profession of eternal union does the arc of their love once again come into focus.

