

“Kaspar Hauser” – a production diary

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I.

“This story of Kaspar Hauser I wish to write myself”

Why an opera about Kaspar Hauser?

On May 26, 1827, a young man suddenly appeared in the city of Nuremberg, walking oddly, making strange sounds and, instead of answering questions, repeating the sentences of others in a distorted fashion. This young man, who called himself Kaspar Hauser, attracted enormous interest. Initial attempts to shed light on the mystery and fill the vacuum of his past came to nothing.

Then, through the use of increasingly aggressive interrogation that was more akin to suggestion than systematic questioning, a story emerged that has continued to nourish fascination with Hauser ever since: that for his entire life he had been confined to a dark room without any contact with the world outside, without parents, siblings or friends.

After Hauser had been kept in a Nuremberg prison and practically put on display to crowds of curious onlookers traveling ever-greater distances to see him, he was taken in by Friedrich Daumer, an Ansbach teacher on leave. He then came into the household of a schoolmaster named Johann Georg Meyer, where he died in 1833 after a (possibly staged) stabbing attack. From the outset, the figure of Kaspar Hauser was something that today would be called a media spectacle. People were drawn to this phenomenon with a mixture of interest and pity, not to mention revulsion at the young man’s otherness, and hostility to his narcissism.

I encountered the subject matter through Peter Handke's play and Werner Herzog's film, and the strangely creature-like manner of expression ascribed to Hauser piqued my artistic curiosity. "I wish to be such a horseman as my father was." (*"A söchtener Reiter möcht ih wern, wie mein Vater aner war."*) This sentence, which Hauser uttered with near-manic frequency, has become etched in my memory and, remarkably, has gained in magnetism for me over time rather than losing it. In the preliminary stages of work, however, I also asked myself a question that every opera composer should, and which provides the subtitle to this first work-in-progress report on the opera: Why an opera about Kaspar Hauser? Is that really the right medium for the subject? Using the stylized and highly artificial medium of musical theater, what can I contribute to the telling of Hauser's story that has not already been accomplished by countless scholarly, journalistic and, yes, artistic endeavors? Wouldn't a documentary film or an academic biography be a more appropriate way to tell his story?

It may seem paradoxical, but the answer is that the story of Kaspar Hauser cannot be written. He has no story, no history. The absence of a biography, of an origin, of an identity formed not least through language, and then his elusiveness to any kind of categorization in Nuremberg and Ansbach, is what constitutes Kaspar Hauser and, simultaneously, causes such uncertainty. The many attempts to tell a story "on" him have essentially amounted to so many reifications of Kaspar Hauser. He becomes an object – of projections (the abandoned foundling, the prince of Baden, the Hungarian noble), accusations (the swindler) and medical, pedagogical and quasi-scientific experiments. It is the downright brutal desire to appropriate this utterly incomprehensible figure (not by coincidence was he first put in jail after arriving in Nuremberg).

In coming to grips with Hauser's "non-history," Handke's version is surely the most radical and perhaps the most honest as well. Here, instead of speaking on his own behalf, Hauser is "spoken of." And, it is precisely from this angle that opera appears to be just the right art form to explore the figure of Kaspar Hauser's two most interesting aspects: his creaturely, non-language manner of expression (the stuttering and moaning) and the unsettling emptiness of his biography, the void at the figure's very core.

Perhaps unlike any other art form, opera has the possibility to BE something, instead of being just ABOUT something. That means that, instead of merely having Kaspar's animal-like distance from language "talked" about, all his wordless expressions ring out in language-free singing and other forms of vocal articulation (another report will be devoted solely to the topic of singing in this work). It does not tell a nice story in the absence of Hauser's own history. Instead, the impossibility of representing the void of Hauser's life story becomes a real presence on the opera stage and in the orchestra pit – because sound always leaves behind a vestigial trace that is unintelligible, that cannot be grasped.

When, gradually, the sentimental trumpet cantilenas, soft string chords and accentuating arpeggios on the harp fade into a hushed acoustic desert of colored murmurs, gentle multiphonics and interrupted impulses so brief that they have hardly any tonal identity anymore, both the figures onstage and the spectators on the floor and balconies can directly experience something approaching Kaspar Hauser's nothingness. The preliminary work of the composition process consists chiefly of poring over the voluminous source material, attempting to fit it into a structure – including a textual one – and only then beginning with the musical sketches. These are primarily a matter of

finding different forms of musical stylization for the figures (the “sentimental” terzettino, the “vigorous” heroic tenor, Anna Daumer’s “simple” cantilenas) that correspond to all the protagonists’ self-stylizations that emerge from the sources. (Only Kaspar Hauser initially evades any categorized identity. Only slowly does he take on the role of “Kaspar Hauser.”) The situations Kaspar finds himself in can likewise be “labeled:” the interrogation, the evaluation, the matter-of-fact report – only Kaspar’s own articulations, defying all classification, repeatedly crosscut this formal ordering.

During the preliminary phase, as well as while working on each scene, I asked myself again and again, who is Kaspar? Is he, perhaps, a swindler after all? Is he schizophrenic, traumatized, or has he really suffered a loss of memory? Put more simply, is he a victim or offender? The difficulty in refraining from immediately answering these questions and instead enduring their openness has been perhaps the biggest challenge to accompany me, constantly, in the process of composition: in a nutshell, to not give Kaspar Hauser a story.

“This story of Kaspar Hauser I wish to write myself,” was how the young man began one of three drafts of his autobiography, only the last one of which he managed to more or less finish. It is an autobiography so defined by outside forces that any trace of an inner identity at the time in it was probably completely overwritten by the internalized projections of the society that surrounded him. Amid the cacophony of documents, texts and reports on Hauser it is nearly impossible to “give him a voice” through opera. Yet it seems to me of central importance that the musical theater stage should offer a platform for the gradual silencing of his otherness – because the necessity to provide a place to listen to the otherness and incomprehensibility of this person is as relevant today as it was in May 1827.

II.

“He Bue!”

How do they sing?

Asking questions about the singing in music theater quickly leads us onto slippery ground. “Why do they sing?” is the objection to opera in general that one hears all the time. And indeed, there is something strange, artificial and even unjustifiable about operatic singing.

One could argue using physical categories: Singing gives the voice a power that it could never have from unamplified speaking. Anyone who has ever heard a tenor sing a Puccini fortissimo accompanied by a full orchestra will immediately understand this argument. Also, besides the gain in volume, singing naturally opens up the possibility of harmony with other voices. And much more than the spoken word, the sonic and acoustic qualities of singing allows for timbral connections with other instruments in the music. As it is often said yet far too seldom actually experienced in opera, the human voice really is the most versatile and colorful “instrument.” Unfortunately, the argument citing the acoustic possibilities of singing does not really bring us onto firmer ground. We are still left with the sheer oddness of operatic singing. The question remains: Why do they sing dialogues, monologues and stories instead of just notes or music?

Yet the inquiry into singing in music theater leads not only to slippery ground, but also – paradoxically – to the essence of the genre itself. The core of opera’s appeal lies in the potential for almost immediate expression. This may seem contradictory, because the union of speech and a highly contrived

manner of singing manifestly makes opera the most affected and “mediated” form of art. Still, behind all the affectations, artificialities and conventions in the singing, both the specific fascination and the importance of opera lie in the possibility of experiencing something astonishingly rare in our time: almost immediate presence. It is the presence of the irreproducible singularity of a singing person before us onstage, and the sudden presence that his or her singing unfolds at that moment.

The relationship between the vocal figure’s moments of immediate expression and the operatic genre’s conventions is dialectic: Presence arises precisely through the friction with the artificialities and conventions of the medium; and the fascination of central moments of the operatic repertoire, such as Leonora’s high appoggiaturas in *D’Amor, sull’ ali rosee* in Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*, lies not simply in the athletic display of virtuosity (the “high C”) but in the detachment of individual notes from the conventional context of harmony and melody into a momentary experience of these notes as a both a sonic and physical presence.

Far more productive than “why do they sing?” is the question of “how do they sing, and what function does the manner of singing have for the story onstage?” The starting point of my work as a composer on the subject of Kaspar Hauser was asking: What does Kaspar Hauser sound like? How does he articulate? And, in direct connection, how for that matter do the other protagonists sing? What “voices” do Mayor Binder, Police Actuary Scheuerl, Captain von Wessenig have? The manners in which these figures sing, it should be noted, are not simply aspects of an existing musical language that makes itself available and from which I, the composer, then “let them sing.” The manner of singing is inseparably linked to the story being presented.

In the historical documents on Kaspar Hauser, the many court files, letters and pamphlets, one can recognize an interesting common trait. In nearly all the evidence, more than just the efforts of the real historical figures to write the story of Kaspar Hauser becomes clear. One also sees them present and assert their own identities like a label, and quite aggressively at that. The remarks are full of self-representations: Binder, the "sensitive humanitarian;" Wessenig, the "upper-class" officer; Scheurl's "natural yet aggressive authority," Anna Daumer, who defines herself as a "sister" and "daughter." Similarly, one of the core functions of singing in clearly defined conventions is to establish a "borrowed" identity. One needs to spend just half a day with a group of teenagers to understand that specific musical conventions contribute just as strongly, and perhaps far more profoundly, to the articulation of identity as the fashion conventions for the group identities of hipsters, yuppies, hippies, punks or mods.

The figures in Kaspar Hauser therefore style themselves into their wished-for identities through their singing. From Wessenig's rising crescendo figurations with their grandiose air to Binder's lyrical cantilenas and their sentimentality, from Scheuerl's imperious forte repetitions to Anna Daumer's submissively falling lines, the characters' vocal figurations are their attempts to take on an identity. Early on, the story's petit-bourgeois figures share an almost spoken delivery. All begin by describing the situation; the dispassionately observed events are reported almost entirely in a syllabic parlando.

Kaspar Hauser then crashes into this society of self-styled figures like a singing meteorite. His vocal identity is ungraspable. He staggers through all kinds of vocal articulation: from long lines on vowels to hard consonantal stops, from noises to extremely extended melodies to compressed speech (or, more

precisely, parroting). Not even his voice type can be labeled as an identity. The countertenor – itself already ambivalent as a man with a “female” voice – sings both high falsettos and with a fully rounded chest voice, leaping about and defying identification through all vocal registers.

Yet the story of Kaspar Hauser and the city where he appeared would be irrelevant if one failed to go beyond the contrast between the clearly labeled singing of the townspeople on the one hand and Hauser’s indefinable vocal meandering on the other. The relationship is both more complex and unstable. Lying beneath the protagonists’ vocal stereotypes are “abysses” – natural, ungraspable aspects that appear for only brief moments, revealing the townspeople’s fears of their own nothingness, their actual identities that cannot be clearly summarized – which lie beneath the protagonists’ vocal stereotypes. It is a fear that only amplifies the desire for a clear identity. In these moments, which parallel Hauser’s own cacophonous world, one senses that this world lies concealed within each of these figures like a suppressed second identity. And so, nearly all the protagonists gradually lose themselves in a different kind of singing, in which they depart from the clear ordering of their stylized vocalizations, approaching instead Kaspar Hauser’s unexplored, noisy, creature-like forms of vocal expression. This convergence stems on the one hand from real interest in this radically different figure and, on the other, from a stereotypical self-identification that leads nowhere. They are the suddenly far too long rest pauses in Binder’s cantilenas, Scheurl’s excessively loud calls, in which the maintenance of the fortissimo tips over into shouting; or the increasingly extended consonants on Feuerbach’s vocal line, which begin to take on a noisy life of their own alongside the traditional singing.

Kaspar Hauser's singing – as disordered and "wild" as it appears at the story's outset, is often closer to the vocal figures of the others than is immediately apparent. His expressions are often just highly distorted echoes of the others, crudely filtered, amplified, with salient consonants or extended intervals, yet almost always a distorted mirror of the singing townspeople and never their own figure. And he, too, changes his manner of singing as the work progresses. As he increasingly takes on the labels that others place on him – the helpless waif, the lost prince, the *wunderkind* – his own vocal articulation likewise becomes more stylized.

"What is the singing like in the opera *Kaspar Hauser*?" It is diverse, yet the manner of singing is directly related to the story itself. The society in which Kaspar Hauser winds up is one of singing stereotypes and conventions. Behind that, however, there slumbers within all the figures a different kind of singing, and the appearance of Hauser unleashes both their desires and anxieties toward this new kind of singing: singing not as a representation of stereotypes, but as a presence, an immediate expression of a different, non-graspable identity that cannot be labeled.

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