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**BETWEEN SINGING AND DYING: THE POSITION OF MUSIC  
IN THE NARRATIVE STRATEGIES OF THE THEATER WORK  
*INFERNAL COMEDY: CONFESSIONS OF A SERIAL KILLER***

**Abstract:** Moving in the “in-between” spaces, both regarding genre and content, director and playwright Michael Sturminger, in collaboration with conductor Martin Hasselböck and actor John Malkovich, wrote an intriguing work of art called “The Infernal Comedy: Confessions of a Serial Killer”. This piece, premiered in 2009, is a monodrama with musical numbers taken from already existing operas, which are recontextualized and become an integral part of the play, acquiring different dramatic functions during the performance. Female vocal soloists (two sopranos) are present on stage as musical performers, but also as actors – in fact, they constantly move in spaces between reality and fiction. In this sense they have a very specific position within what can be described as an artistic game of meanings and divergent plans, i.e. registers of speech. In this paper we will analyze precisely these diverse dimensions of the text, as well as the position and role of music in the drama; the relationship between the narrative planes of the arias and the dramatic text, as well as the dramatic treatment of female vocal soloists, who are, depending on the context, either subjects or objects, passive or active participants in the action, occupying different places within the narrative structure.

**Keywords:** Michael Sturminger, Martin Haselböck, John Malkovich, *Infernal Comedy: Confessions of a Serial Killer*, theater, recontextualization.

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*The Infernal Comedy, Confessions of a Serial Killer* (2009) is a monodrama with singing numbers by Michael Sturminger. The work is based on an unusual but true story about the murderer Jack Unterweger who became a writer and poet in prison, only to be pardoned after a petition by prominent intellectuals, and then hired as a journalist, together with the police, investigating a series of murders that took place in Vienna. It will turn out later that he himself committed those crimes. After being arrested on suspicion of having committed numerous murders of prostitutes, Unterweger committed suicide in his cell in 1994.

Playwright and director Michael Sturminger, together with actor John Malkovich and conductor Martin Haselböck, designed a play whose plot unfolds non-linearly, with stage excursions and manipulation of the relationship between time and space. Namely, the main and only character, Unterweger, comes to the *posthumous* promotion of his own memoirs, in which he tells the story of his life. He addresses the audience, speaking in multiple registers, moving between the roles of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator. It is therefore a meta-theatrical performance, in which music plays a very important role, as a mediator between different narrative plans. It is a binding thread that functions on the denotative and connotative level.

Namely, Martin Haselböck chose already existing music pieces, compositions which were then implemented into the content itself, contributing to the dramatic charge, but also, with its meaningful role, to the dramatic complementation. The conductor carefully selected the compositions that in expression, but above all, thematically, correspond in a certain way to the content of the theater piece. The role of female vocal soloists (two sopranos) is particularly delicate in this sense. Their performance works within the framework of mixed narrative modes. They move between different forms of dramatic action, occupying an allegorical but also a mono-dimensional position.

The work, which is otherwise marked as a *Stage play for Baroque Orchestra, two sopranos and one actor*, is divided into eight *chapters*, which are performed without interruption:

**Chapter 1:** Introduction – Christoph Willibald Gluck: *Chaconne*, “L’*enfer*” from *Don Juan* (1761);

**Chapter 2:** Where to begin? – Luigi Boccherini: *Chaconne*, “La Casa del Diavolo” from *Symphony in D minor*, G. 506 (1771);

**Chapter 3:** Mother – Antonio Vivaldi: “Sposa son disprezzata” from *Ottone in Villa* (1713); (sic)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an unclear reason, the available programs of the work mention the opera *Ottone in Villa*, but in fact it is an aria from the opera *Bayazit*.

**Chapter 4:** Womanizer – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: “Vorrei spiegarvi, oh Dio!” K. 418 (1783);

**Chapter 5:** Writer – Gluck: “Ballo grazioso” from *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762); Ludwig van Beethoven: “Ah, perfido” Op. 65 (1795–1796);

**Chapter 6:** Liar – Joseph Haydn: “Berenice, che fai” Hob. XXIVa:10’ (1795);

**Chapter 7:** Killer – Carl Maria von Weber: “Ah, se Edmundo fosse l’uccisor!” (insertion aria for Mehul’s *Hélène*) (1815);

**Chapter 8:** Exit – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, “Ah, lo previdi!” K. 272 (1777)<sup>2</sup>

The performance begins with Chaconne, “L’enfer” from *Don Juan* by Christoph Willibald Gluck. The very title of the work, which has Don Juan as its theme, is connected with the idea of establishing an identification relationship between this character and the protagonist of the play. Namely, in the very opening part of the text, the main character draws a parallel between his name John, with the name and fate of Don Juan:

“Jack, as you may know is Johannes or Hans in German, Juan and Giovanni in Spanish and Italian. And of course, John. John may seem a common name. Just John. But if you wear this name, women will love you or hate you – call you a liar or pervert – but they will never leave you alone.”<sup>3/4</sup>

So, on a connotative level, the used piece of music makes a connection with the character and behavior of the main protagonist. He is a modern Don Juan, who, like the one from the text of Ranier de’ Calzabigi, will end his life tragically. This very choice of segment of the composition functions as a kind of prolepsis, since already at the beginning, with its title that indicates Don Juan’s journey to hell, it indicates the character and moral stumbling of the protagonist, and what will lead him to death. The connection that can be established between Don Juan and Unterweger is complex, since there is no direct reflection. What unites them is a specific attitude towards women, general fickleness and the need to constantly play with other people’s feelings, in order to achieve satisfaction or dominance. Don Juan sees pleasure in conquest and lust, after which he loses interest in love as such, while in Unterweger, that equation ends in murder. Also, both characters are kind of

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<sup>2</sup> See: [https://calperformances.org/learn/program\\_notes/2011/pn\\_malkovich.pdf](https://calperformances.org/learn/program_notes/2011/pn_malkovich.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> *The Infernal Comedy Script*, [https://www.wienerakademie.at/projekte/vergangene\\_projekte/the\\_infernal\\_comedy](https://www.wienerakademie.at/projekte/vergangene_projekte/the_infernal_comedy)

<sup>4</sup> The fact that the actor himself, for whom the play was written, is also called John, adds to the confusion for the recipients about the relationship between reality and fiction (That obfuscation of speech registers, breaking down the *fourth wall*, will remain constant of the piece).

renegades from society, who, as Albert Camus says, when talking about Don Juan, live in the *absurd*.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, both are “modern characters”, because “[...] Don Juan represents a specific modern myth, i.e. the myth of modern times [...] upheaval and destruction”.<sup>6</sup> The lack of empathy and repentance is also an important link between these protagonists, bearing in mind that Unterweger, like Don Juan, “limits himself to the sensual perceptions of the present moment, thus becoming incapable of remorse or dread”.<sup>7</sup> This lack of repentance, but also in Unterweger’s case of constant traversal, which hides an almost demonic sinisterness, can be registered through the music itself. Namely, Gluck’s work, which introduces the audience to the drama, immediately precedes the exposition of one side of the protagonist’s personality, which is seductive and charming. As stated in the script:

“After the music has ended, a handsome man of middle age wearing a white suit and dark sunglasses enters the stage and welcomes the audience with a brief, charming speech, to the primary reading of his latest and last novel titled *The infernal comedy*”.<sup>8</sup>

It is indicative that the conductor chose Gluck’s production of Don Juan, which ends with a sudden major rounding, which suddenly vaults into a furious cadence, introducing a dose of final questioning over the character of the story itself. However, in the first chapter of the play, which aims to present a “charming” man, there is a subtle shading of his character, with sudden reactions, which indicate Unterweger’s deceitful and manipulative game. Thus, he announces two female soloists who will perform numbers at certain moments during the performance, which receive applause from the audience,

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<sup>5</sup> As Camus states: “What Don Juan achieves is an ethic of quantity, which is the opposite of the aspiring saint quality. Not believing in the essential meaning of things is a characteristic of an absurd man(...) Time goes with him. An absurd man is one who does not separate himself from time. Don Juan does not mean to make a ‘collection’ of women. He exhausts their number and with them he wastes his chances of life. Making a collection of women means being a man capable of living from the past.” Alber Kami, *Mit o Sizifu, Ogled o apsurdu*, Beograd, Paideia, 2008, 86. (transl. into English by Radoš Mitrović)

<sup>6</sup> Никола Р. Бјелић, „Интертекстуалне везе између комада *Ноћ у Валоњи* Ерик-Емануела Шмита и Молијеровог *Дон Жуана*“, *Philologia Mediana*, XIII, 2021, 78. (transl. into English by Radoš Mitrović)

<sup>7</sup> Francis L. Lawrence, “Don Juan and the Manifest God: Moliere’s Antitragic Hero”, *PMLA*, 93/1, 1978, 86.

<sup>8</sup> *The Infernal Comedy Script*,

[https://www.wienerakademie.at/projekte/vergangene\\_projekte/the\\_infernal\\_comedy](https://www.wienerakademie.at/projekte/vergangene_projekte/the_infernal_comedy)

but which he, obviously irritated, abruptly and angrily interrupts. This is the first indication of his sociopathic behavior, which is indicated in the script itself.<sup>9</sup> This outburst of anger is followed by the second chapter, which begins with the last movement of Luigi Boccherini's *Sinfonia in Re minore Op. 12 No. 4*, which is particularly indicative in this context. Namely, Boccherini's work is subtitled *Della Casa del diavolo*, while the last movement contains the determinant: *Chaconne qui représente l'Enfer et qui a été faite à imitation de celle de Mr. Gluck dans le Festin de Pierre* (Chaconne representing Hell, which was written in imitation of that by Mr. Gluck in his 'Stone Guest'). It is a very clear paraphrase of Gluck's work, which has, for the context of this work, a very significant change in the musical content at the very end. Namely, Boccherini's work does not contain "bright" harmonies that round off the drama, but, by cadencing in D minor, which represents a significant gesture aimed at the author's philosophical dialogue with Gluck's original work, they point to the character of Don Juan's actions, but also to the impossibility of getting out of *life's*, and then 'real' hell. Such a connotation corresponds with the exposition of the other side of Unterweger's character, within the second chapter of the piece, in which his anxiety is exposed, which causes him to abruptly interrupt the orchestra and not allow him to finish the performance, with a sentence:

"Excuse me for my interruption but I have yet to define the structure of this event and I know you may be expecting a performance but this is after all merely a reading and even so we barely had any rehearsal together and I am not really used to this kind of music – it makes me nervous. This has

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<sup>9</sup> "JACK: Yes and before I forget, I will have the pleasure to introduce you to two wonderful ladies, disposed to sing a few nice old fashioned pieces of music, while I will have to clear my throat. Jack briefly points at two incredibly beautiful women in wonderful evening dresses, who make their appearances and receive a warm and friendly applause.

Jack suddenly cuts off the ovations with a harsh gesture, irritatingly different from his charming attitude so far and angrily indicates the singers, to go away and make their exit. Somehow irritated and baffled the ladies leave the stage, as Jack, all his captivating self again, addresses the public again.

JACK: Those two wonderful women will come back soon and, as our story goes on, represent several women of my life. Their music and singing was, to be honest right away, my editor's idea and is supposed to help to underline the impact of the reading. Well, let's not be unfair and give them a real chance...

For the beginning, we might content ourselves with an instrumental tune, while I prepare my introduction." Ibid.

nothing to do with the quality of the orchestra or the conductor, but normally I am not able to stand this kind of music. It makes me physically stressed... especially, when I'm trying to think. It is merely a question of concentration and distraction."<sup>10</sup>

After the interruption of the orchestra, thereby assuming the role of an intrusive narrator, he continues the monologue, talking about the fact that 15 years have passed since his death, the amount of time he spent in prison, and that that time can seem like "eternity". He then begins the story of his life before the murders, with the dramatically indicative sentence: "The first thing I learned was a smile and that smile was already a lie."<sup>11</sup>

The next chapter is dedicated to the narrative of Unterweger's mother, who got him young, from an affair with an American soldier who returned to his homeland, never knowing about the child. Desperate for his sudden departure, after giving birth, she leaves the child in her father's house and abandons him. This family history is followed by the aria *Sposa son disprezzata* by Antonio Vivaldi, from the pasticcio opera *Bayazit*.<sup>12</sup> It's about Irene's aria, who sings about emotional brokenness and love for her unfaithful husband Tamerlane. This is an extremely lyrical aria, with a subtle sound, with two contrasting stanzas, while the second one is shorter, more energetic and with a touch of optimism, with the thought of the protagonist that maybe there is some hope after all. As the soloist performs this number, Unterweger watches her carefully, then gently hugs her. Namely, the soloist, who should occupy a role 'outside the narrative', far from the theatrical illusion, at that moment becomes the character of Unterweger's mother. It is about the fact that the soloist becomes a means of analepsis within the drama. There is a re-signification of the aria itself, where it is no longer about mourning Irene's fate, but the unfortunate fate of Unterweger's mother. His gentle embrace, after the end of the aria, turns into a rough grip and the soloist, who only then seems to realize that she has been 'put' into the *performance*, tries to defend herself, and in the end, after an aggressive push, she ends up on the ground, scared and shocked.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> The music for this aria was composed by Geminiano Giacomelli, for the opera *La Merope* (1736).

<sup>13</sup> "Jack watches the young and beautiful singer, as she starts to sing the quiet and gentle aria, slowly and calmly crossing the stage without noticing him. Like in a time window Jack watches her fascinated and, – step by step – comes closer, gazing at every move she makes. Jack finally embraces the singer and holds her fast until the music has ended.

After this extraction of the genesis of Unterweg's attitude towards women, which is connected to his attitude towards his mother, there follows a kind of resting point within the work, with the fourth chapter, which is entitled *Womanizer*. Speaking about women (in the manner of Don Juan) and the need to seduce them, the protagonist interacts with a vocal soloist who performs the concert aria *Vorrei spiegarvi, oh Dio* by W.A. Mozart. What is specific here is the fact that while, in the previous chapter, we have a soloist who emerges from the role of an *outsider* and becomes an *allegorical* figure within the narrative itself, in this segment of the piece, her performance functions as a *scene within a scene*. Namely, her interaction with the protagonist is related to the primary narrative layer, i.e. she is 'performing' as part of his 'book promotion'. In this sense, her performance, as well as his actions, do not cross divergent narrative registers. In the script itself, there are indications that speak of it.<sup>14</sup> Unterweg seduces the soloist, bringing her flowers and care-

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After the music has ended, Jack does not open his embrace, but he holds her more aggressively and then pushes the singer to the floor. She loses her shoes as she tries to push him back, but he manages to lie on her and close his hands on her neck. In sudden horror Jack opens his hands.

After a moment of gazing into her face, Jack stands up and, like waking up from a deep sleep, he returns to his chair and table, where he sits down and refills his glass with water. Meanwhile the singer slowly gets up from the floor. Still in a state of shock she rearranges her dress, takes her high heel shoes into her hands and leaves the stage, without looking into Jack's direction." Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Soprano 2 enters with the score in her hand concentrated and selfaware like a diva in a regular concert.

JACK: Gentlemen, I can only advise you to follow my example in this special matter, but listen to this woman and you will immediately be rewarded.

Jack is facing the Soprano and supplying her with applause. The orchestra plays the first notes and the singer starts to sing.

While she is singing, Jack listens touched and concentrated. He follows her interpretation, as if he could understand every word of her baroque Italian lyrics, he is so deeply touched, that he seems have tears in his eyes.

She discovers him in the audience. More and more fascinated she gets distracted and drops her notes at the desk. Jack enters the stage and gives her the notes back, wanting her to go on singing for the audience. Then all over a sudden he runs off the stage, only to return a few moments later, with a wonderful bouquet of flowers, that he hands to the contented Soprano. After she has thrown that bouquet at the floor he leaves the stage again to return with a Sacher Torte.

fully watching her performance, which she notices during the performance and understands as pleasant flattery. The aim of this interpolation of the vocal number is to portray the “seductive” side of the protagonist, who shows the audience the way of “adequate treatment” towards women. In this sense, the performance of the vocal soloist has an illustrative role in the story of Unterweger, who sets himself up as an omnipresent narrator, directing the events on stage. Precisely for this reason, the author chose an insertion aria for Pasquale Anfossi’s opera *Il curioso indiscreto*, which, according to operatic tradition, aims to show the soloist’s vocal virtuosity.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, the soloist actually performs in the piece as the prototype of a prima donna, i.e. the ideal women of Unterweger.

The fifth chapter, entitled *The Writer*, is the central dramaturgical point of the play, in which Unterweger reveals that he is responsible for the murders of women and explains how he did it. The music that accompanies this segment of the piece is *Ballo grazioso* from Gluck’s opera *Orpheus*. It contains an antithetical character, in relation to the almost eerie atmosphere of Unterweger’s speech, and in this sense, underlines his terrifying appearance. It is about anempathetic music that participates in the melodrama and accompanies the exposition of the protagonist. However, the key moment is the entrance of two vocal soloists. The first soprano thus begins the performance of the scene and the aria *Ah Perfido*, by Ludwig van Beethoven, in which the protagonist begs her lover not to leave her and to have mercy on her, because otherwise she will die. The aria contains changes in mood and emotions, from hatred to love, from the desire for revenge, to a prayer. Precisely because of this duality of emotions, the Sturminger predicted that the aria would actually be sung by two soloists, bearing in mind that Unterweger demonstrates the methods of killing by strangulation, forcing the second so-

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### Chapter five

Piling the Sacher Torte, the loose flowers and the notes in her arms, Jack claps his hands and applauds along with the audience. Then leads the singer off the stage and returns to his chair, where he sits down and smiles at the spectators. He seems to be in a very good mood.” Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “Aria insertions offered a wealth of benefits that singers might have been unable to reap by remaining faithful to a score, especially if the opera in question was not written with their specific talents in mind (...) singers inserted arias to accommodate their individual vocal strengths and ranges and to augment their roles.” Hilary Poriss, *Changing the Score, Arias, Prima Donnas and the Authority of Performance*, Oxford University Press, 2009, 5.

loist to continue where the first was unable to sing. And in this part, the vocal soloists, whom Unterweger nearly smothers on stage, become the protagonists of the drama, suddenly switching from one to another dramatic register.<sup>16</sup> The epilogue of the fifth scene takes place in the next scene, which is entitled *The Liar*, in which Unterweger finally brutally kills the first soprano, by violent strangulation. They represent his victims in real life, but in the next scene there is a twist.

Namely, in the last convulsions of repentance, talking about losing the love of his life, because he lied to her, Unterweger falls into despair and the dead soprano (whom he 'killed' in the previous scene), according to indications within the script itself, *comes to life* and 'becomes Bianca', Unterweger's partner, who left him when his trial for the murders began. The soprano then sings *Scena di Berenice* by Joseph Haydn. The text is based on the ninth scene of the third act of the opera *Antigone* by Pietro Metastasio and represents Berenice's mourning over Demetrius, and then expressing her desire to die next to her beloved. At this moment, the soprano is alone on stage for the first time, since Unterweger is leaving her. Thus, the impersonal soprano be-

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<sup>16</sup> "Jack goes to Soprano 2, produces a transparent bra out of his pocket and in a strangely intimate movement he fits the underwear on top the singer's breasts and dress, which she does not dare to hinder. Then he comes behind Soprano 1 and also draws a brassier over her breasts. In a fast movement he lifts the bra and strangles her – the music starts to play... The orchestra starts to play and Jack pushes the singer (Soprano 1) to the side, trying to strangle her, while the other of the singers (Soprano 2) is singing and interfering to stop him. Jack slowly moves around the singer with an enigmatic grin in his face and lifts his hand to stop the soprano and signaling the other singer (Soprano 1) to continue the singing. The singer seems surprised and needs a moment until she finds the right line and sings on. Then he returns his attention to Soprano2 and forces her to his chair, where he rudely pushes her into the seat. Jack sits down on the table, takes one of the books and quietly reads some of the lines. Jack seems calm and concentrated, as if he had forgotten the existence of the humiliated woman in the chair behind himself. Then he turns around to her and again addresses the audience... While he is speaking calmly, Jack slowly seizes the woman's bra, straps and ties the elastic bands of the bra around the shocked woman's neck, where he is knotting a noose. Without changing the tone of his speech, Jack pulls the bands with all his strength around the woman's neck. Choking and coughing she tries to get her hands inside the elastic band, but without success. Since Jack is using all his weight, the two of them fall to the floor, where Jack is trying not let his struggle show. Jack pulls the elastic band as strong as possible, until the woman finishes her resistance and in the next moment lies motionless and still on the floor, her head on Jacks lap, like Jesus and Mary in Michelangelo's *Pieta*." *The Infernal Comedy Script*, *ibid*.

comes a concrete character and for the first time is no longer an object, but the subject of the drama. This is actually the culmination of the drama itself; the subjectivization of the suffering character, now in a figurative sense, over Unterweger's death, like Berenice, over Demetrius. Her death is symbolic, he killed her *with his lies*. And so follows the indicative gesture, at Unterweger's return to the scene – she returns “to lie dead”, while he slowly, during the next scene, covers her with his books, which are just that – lies.

During this Unterweger gesture in the seventh chapter, the second soprano performs an aria by Karl Maria von Weber, which was added during the performance of Étienne-Nicolas Méhul's opera *Hélène* in 1815 in Prague – *Ah! se Edmondo fosse l'uccisor*, in which, after vicissitudes, it is found out who the real murderer in the opera is.<sup>17</sup> The performance of the soprano manifests itself here as an intradiegetic narrator, indicating, within the aria of conveyed meaning, the resolution of the dilemma and the fact that Unterweger was a murderer from the beginning.<sup>18</sup>

In the last chapter, he states that having committed suicide, he missed the court's verdict and that he remains innocent. Unterweger pronounces:

“I know, that I have been a great disappointment to all of you and most of all to myself. I am longing for the truth as much as you are and I could not find anything more desirable than honesty, but it has not been given to me. I cannot produce any true word. I am a failure... and so is my book.”<sup>19</sup>

He then takes a rope and wraps it around his head, leading the audience to think he's going to kill himself on stage, with a performance of Mozart's concert aria *Ah, lo previdi! Ah, t'invola* – “Deh, non varcar” adding suspense – in which Andromeda laments the suicide of Perseus. During the unfolding of that uncertain drama, the soloist lies next to Unterweger on the table, provoking, as stated in the script, his jump, and then, after the aria ends, on leaving the stage, leaves with a noose around the neck. In this sense, there is the re-signification of the aria, which from a lyrical lament, becomes an ironic provocation, in which the victim now takes the place of the one who *apparently* controls the situation. Instead of sincere sadness for the suicide of

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<sup>17</sup> In question is the figure of a count named Edmont, who unjustly accused his rival Constantin, Count of Aries, that he killed his own father, which results in the necessity of his escape, only to later, on his deathbed, Edmont admit that he is the killer, which resolves the drama.

<sup>18</sup> Aria begins, after the line of the main protagonist: “Please Mr. Conductor, play something and give me a f\*\*ng break”. Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Perseus, the aria turns into a kind of provocation addressed to Unterweger, as support for him to commit suicide. The fact that the aria ends in B flat major with a short last tone in the vocal section and an almost scherzo-like rounding in the string instruments contributes to this feeling. However, it will turn out that it is not only a provocation by the soprano, but that aria also becomes an expression of provocation by Unterweger himself, who abruptly ends the suspense, addressing the audience with the words: "Did you really think I was going to kill myself in the theater?" As he states:

"I already killed myself once, and I can tell you this is no experience I want to repeat. Trust me on that one. If you want to, you can come back tomorrow night and see if I changed my mind. But for tonight I have had enough!"

In that reaction by Unterweger, it turns out that the first dramatic level was only a deception, and that it is about the fact that even during the performance of the last aria, Unterweger remained the omnipresent protagonist, while the soprano only *played her role* in his play.

Therefore, based on what has been presented, it can be concluded that music plays a very important role in the theatrical piece *The Infernal Comedy, Confessions of a Serial Killer*, which is inseparable from the dramatic flow. It complements and 'revives' it and represents another narrative register, which, as we have seen, has diverse functions within the drama itself. Through the establishment of implicit connections between the musical/textual content and the dramatic text, there is a re-signification within which musical numbers, placed in a new context, begin to function as allegorical representations. In this sense, the performers *come to life* dramatically and move between the subjects and objects of the dramatic action, as well as between divergent narrative tonalities, which the protagonists, i.e. the playwright establishes. This results in a complex narrative structure of the work, which has a mixed-genre character and which, undoubtedly, moves within an authentically set musical and stage framework.

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## Summary

*The Infernal Comedy, Confessions of a Serial Killer* (2009) is a monodrama with singing numbers by Michael Sturminger. The work is based on an unusual but true story about the murderer Jack Unterweger who became a writer and poet in prison, only to be pardoned after a petition by prominent intellectuals, and then hired as a journalist, together with the police, investigating a series of murders that took place in Vienna. It will turn out later that he himself committed those crimes. After being arrested on suspicion of having committed numerous murders of prostitutes, Unterweger committed suicide in his cell in 1994.

Playwright and director Michael Sturminger, together with actor John Malkovich and conductor Martin Haselböck, designed a play based on these events. Namely, the main and only character, Unterweger, comes to the posthumous promotion of his own memoirs, in which he tells the story of his life. It is a specifically designed, meta-theatrical performance, which can be read on several levels. Its dramatic structure is non-linear and based on a narrative that moves in the spaces “between” – between “reality” and “fiction”, i.e. between different registers of speech. The work contains musical numbers taken from already existing works and they aim to complement the dramatic content, bringing a new level of possible interpretation. This paper deals with the position of musical numbers within the text and their semantic basis, which is complex. Female vocal soloists (two sopranos) are present on stage as musical performers, but also as actors – in fact, they constantly change their narrative function. In this sense they have a very specific position within what can be described as an artistic game of meanings and divergent plans, i.e. registers of speech. They become subjects or objects in relation to the dramatic context and have an active or passive role. The sopranos occupy a wide range of positions, from allegorical figures to intradiegetic narrators, as the protagonist himself is a, inter alia, mere observer, an intrusive narrator, or he himself ‘enters’ his own story. He addresses the audience, speaking in multiple ‘voices’, moving also between the roles of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator.

Through the analysis of the position of each individual music piece, the paper aims to interpret the ways of structuring the dramatic ‘action’, to point out the key points for understanding the connotative meaning of the application of certain means and to provide a more comprehensive picture of the scope and complex dramatic processes that are woven into the work that is designed as a mixed-genre theatrical piece.