

The Juncture Of Musical Theatre And Theatrical Music: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This paper is a position paper that highlights the intersection of musical theatre and theatrical music, two art forms within the Ghanaian context that blend music and drama but with distinct orientations. The essence is to clarify blurred boundaries and lack of clear distinction between these two art forms, which often leads students of music to confusion or misinterpretation in composition and performance discourse, performance practices, and artistic production. The approach used is a review of some topical issues related to the topic to unravel the distinction to make contribution to knowledge in music composition and performance as well as other cognate disciplines such as ethnomusicology and theatre studies. It is seen that while musical theatre integrates music as a vehicle for storytelling within a staged performance, theatrical music emphasises music's dramatic qualities without necessarily conforming to theatrical conventions. The two concepts have shared elements such as narrative, emotional expression, and performance as well as some differences in structure. Understanding the two Chiasmus is key to composing works that identify the key juncture where these art forms converge, offering insights into their mutual influence in contemporary performance.

Keywords: Musical theatre, theatrical music, performance Art, interdisciplinary art, narrative music

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I. Introduction

In one of my lessons on how to compose operetta or opera in the Ghanaian cultural context, it became crystal clear that students usually confuse with musical compositions that integrate dramatic scenes or dramatic compositions that are entirely music. It was seen that such compositions within the Ghanaian cultural context are rare and difficult to find them. They only rely on the essentials of popular operas of Western music and try to replicate them. Indeed, the relationship between music and drama has been an essential part of human expression and culture throughout history, with both art forms evolving together in various ways. In our further discussions, two prominent manifestations of this relationship emerged as musical theatre and theatrical music. While these terms may appear synonymous, they represent distinct yet interrelated forms of performance. Musical theatre primarily focuses on the integration of songs, dialogue, and choreography within a dramatic narrative on stage, often with the aim of entertaining and telling stories through a structured theatrical form (Roesner, 2016). Theatrical music, on the other hand, refers to music that possesses dramatic qualities or is composed to enhance a dramatic event, yet is not bound by the same narrative or staging conventions as musical theatre (Deer & Dal Vera, 2021).

Despite their differences, the boundaries between musical theatre and theatrical music have increasingly blurred in performances, where both forms share spaces and techniques (Sheppard, (2001). This intersection raises questions about their unique identities, functions, and the ways in which they influence each other. As new works emerge that combine elements of both, the need to clarify their distinct contributions and explore their convergences becomes essential for students scholars, practitioners, and audiences alike. Through the literature, the paper unravels the juncture at which musical theatre and theatrical music meet, examining the shared elements and differences between the two. In this regard, it provides a deeper understanding of how these forms function independently and collaboratively, and how they contribute to both artistic innovation and cultural discourse. Consequently, the paper addresses a gap in existing literature by offering a cohesive framework for understanding the overlap between musical theatre and theatrical music, emphasising their distinct features while highlighting their mutual influences. In doing so, it offers insights that are not only academically relevant but also valuable for practitioners and educators in both fields.

II. Theoretical Frameworks

In writing this paper, an integration of concepts from interdisciplinary performance theory (Fenske, 2007) and narratology (Bal, 2009) became relevant while also drawing on relevant ideas from music semiotics and theatre studies. This combination allowed for a robust exploration of how music and drama intertwine, both in form and function, within musical theatre and theatrical music. The interdisciplinary performance theory emphasises performance as an event rather than a fixed work of art. In its application, it deals with how musical theatre and theatrical music function as dynamic, live experiences where music and drama continuously interact with the audience and evolve in each performance. This theory also gives a distinction between "drama," "script," and "theatre" and provides insights into how musical elements are interpreted differently in a theatrical context. Again, the theory of Narratology by Bal (2009) focuses on the structure of narratives, Bal's narratology provides a lens to explore how storytelling in musical theatre is structured differently from the way music narrates in theatrical music. In musical theatre, songs often serve specific narrative functions (e.g., character development, plot progression), while in theatrical music, the music itself may embody the dramatic narrative without relying on traditional story arcs. These theories discuss performance as a reflection of cultural and social processes. Applying their work can help unravel the juncture of musical theatre and theatrical music as a Chiasmus concept.

III. Review Of Related Literature

The Juncture of Musical Theatre and Theatrical Music

The relationship between music and theatre has long been a subject of inquiry, with both disciplines serving as complementary modes of expression throughout history (Korsyn, 2003). Musical theatre and theatrical music, while often conflated or used interchangeably, represent distinct yet interrelated forms of artistic expression. This literature review explores key studies and theoretical contributions to the understanding of these forms, examining their intersections, differences, and the broader socio-cultural implications of their interaction. The review focuses on how scholars have approached the narrative role of music, the cultural and political significance of musical theatre, and the aesthetic considerations of theatrical music in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Musical Theatre: A Synthesis of Art Forms

Musical theatre, as an art form, has its roots in various traditions, including opera, vaudeville, and operetta (Traubner, 2004). Scholars like Wolf (2011) and McMillin (2007) have analysed musical theatre as a distinct genre that combines music, drama, and dance to tell a cohesive story. Wolf emphasises that musical theatre serves as an effective platform for expressing emotions and advancing narrative through musical numbers, which often function as non-verbal dialogue. McMillin, in his study of musical theatre's structure, suggests that its unique appeal lies in the way it suspends realism, allowing for moments where characters express their inner thoughts through song. These contributions underline the integrative nature of musical theatre, where the score is not an accessory but an essential component of the narrative architecture.

Again, Savran (2022) explores the political dimensions of musical theatre, asserting that it serves as a reflection of societal values and tensions. He argues that the Broadway musical, in particular, offers a space where national identity and political ideologies are negotiated, making it not only an artistic expression but a cultural and political tool. This notion is critical for understanding how musical theatre transcends entertainment to address deeper social and political themes, a point particularly relevant to contexts such as Ghana, where performance arts often serve as a medium for political commentary and cultural identity formation.

While musical theatre uses music to support narrative, theatrical music is defined by its ability to evoke dramatic action without the need for a formal plot or dialogue (Fludernik, 2008). According to Nattiez (1990), music functions as a semiotic system within a theatrical framework, carrying symbolic meaning and evoking specific emotions or themes. Nattiez's tripartite model (poietic, esthetic, and neutral) helps clarify how theatrical music can be perceived both as a standalone work and in relation to its dramatic context. His theory is useful for examining how music, particularly in non-narrative theatrical performances, shapes audience interpretation and emotional response. Furthermore, Kivy (2009), in his exploration of music and drama, distinguishes between absolute music and programmatic music, noting that theatrical music often bridges the gap between the two. Unlike absolute music, which exists purely for aesthetic appreciation, theatrical music often carries extra-musical meaning, directly tied to the dramatic setting or the performer's emotional state. This distinction is significant for understanding how theatrical music can evoke drama without the need for explicit storytelling, a feature that differentiates it from musical theatre.

At the juncture of musical theatre and theatrical music lies a fascinating overlap where both forms borrow from each other's techniques while maintaining distinct identities. Abbate (2004) explores this intersection by analysing how music can serve as both a narrative agent and a dramatic force, depending on its context. She notes that while musical theatre relies on a structured narrative, theatrical music often operates on a more abstract level, with the music itself creating moments of drama and tension. This crossover is evident in works like "West Side

Story", where the orchestral score not only supports the plot but also functions as an emotional and dramatic device. Similarly, a study of opera and its dramatic function by Hollywood (2020) offers valuable insights into how music can shape the emotional landscape of a performance. While opera and musical theatre are distinct, his analysis of how music manipulates audience emotion and enhances dramatic tension can be applied to both musical theatre and theatrical music. Hollywood's work underscores the importance of music as a narrative and dramatic tool, capable of conveying complex emotional states and themes.

Music, Theatre, and Society: A Cultural Perspective

The role of music and theatre in shaping cultural identity and reflecting societal issues has been widely discussed by scholars such as Turner (1986) and Geertz (1973). Turner's concept of cultural performance as a reflection of societal values and rituals is relevant for understanding how both musical theatre and theatrical music function as mirrors of society. Geertz's idea of performance as "deep play" further emphasises the role of the arts in negotiating social tensions and offering political commentary. In the Ghanaian context, Nketia (1974) and Collins (2007) have explored how traditional music and performance arts serve as vehicles for social discourse and political expression. Nketia's study of African traditional music highlights the integrative role of music in society, where it serves not only as entertainment but also as a means of conveying moral lessons and social values. Collins expands on this by discussing how modern Ghanaian popular music and theatre have adopted these traditional roles to comment on political issues, particularly during periods of political transition. This body of work provides a useful framework for examining how musical theatre and theatrical music in Ghana can be seen as extensions of traditional performance practices, with the potential to influence and reflect political and social change.

The technical and aesthetic considerations that differentiate musical theatre from theatrical music have also been discussed in depth by Kerman (1988) and Cook (1998). Kerman's analysis of musical form and dramatic content highlights the importance of structural unity in musical theatre, where every element—music, lyrics, and staging—must serve the overall narrative. Cook actually worked on musical meaning and he offers a broader perspective on how music communicates emotion and action, particularly in theatrical settings where music may not follow a traditional narrative structure but still evokes a strong emotional response. In the light of this, musical theatre, the integration of music and drama is seamless, with songs serving as extensions of the dialogue. In contrast, theatrical music may function independently, often creating dramatic tension through purely musical means. This distinction is crucial for understanding the different roles music plays in both forms and how audiences experience them.

It is worthy of note that while musical theatre and theatrical music are distinct, they share key features, particularly in how they utilise music to convey emotion, drama, and narrative. The intersection of these forms offers fertile ground for further research, particularly in examining how they reflect and influence cultural and political landscapes. As hybrid performances that blur the lines between music and drama continue to emerge, scholars and practitioners need to develop new frameworks to analyse and understand the evolving relationship between these two forms. This review provides a foundation for investigating the juncture of musical theatre and theatrical music, with a focus on their mutual influences and interdependence.

IV. Conclusion

Musical theatre serves as a dynamic platform that blends storytelling with musical expression, however, the interplay between musical theatre and theatrical music allows for a powerful medium of social commentary and political discourse. Indeed, the collaboration between various disciplines, such as music, drama, and education, can enrich the theatrical landscape and foster innovation in Ghanaian performing arts. Educational institutions should incorporate musical theatre and theatrical music into their curricula, encouraging interdisciplinary studies that combine music and drama. This will cultivate a new generation of artists who are well-versed in these interconnected fields. It is also noted that continued research into the intersection of musical theatre and theatrical music is essential. Scholars should document and analyse productions, cultural practices, and audience responses to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in this field.

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