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Adolphe Appia: from Romanticism to the Rhythmic Spaces

Abstract

Adolphe Appia (1862-1928), a notable Swiss theatre reformist, started his career as an admirer of Richard Wagner and his work, but was always critical of how his work was portrayed on the stage at the time. This is how he started his career as a reformist, and started creating sketches, stage designs and writings on how he perceived Wagner's work should be enacted in theatres. He was supported by another of Wagner's admirers, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, an Englishman, who was later on swayed by German chauvinism and later, Nazism. Fortunately, Appia, who started down the same way, paved another road altogether for himself, and reconceptualized the philosophy on synthetic theatre work and proposed reforms on direction and scenography. Later, he moved on from romanticism, worked together with Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and started to create abstract scenic designs, which he called rhythmic spaces. He also moved on from the nationalistic ideology of Wagner into the complete opposite pole, when he started to accent the cult of a healthy body and individual freedom. He became one of the pioneers of modern theatre directing, as we know it today.

Keywords

Adolphe Appia, Richard Wagner, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Festspielhaus Bayreuth, theatrical direction

Bayreuthian Festspielhaus

This is a mostly theoretic study, which will compare the correlation between the canon and ideas of an art piece and its form. We will elaborate this on a historical case – the reform of the theatre as an art form, which happened on the brink of the 20th century. This was done by Adolphe Appia via the works of Richard Wagner. We will show how a reform, that started as a form of envy of Wagner's work, has transformed and gone 2 separate ways, both ending in complete opposite artistic, historic and social poles.

Adolphe Appia (1862–1928) was a Swiss painter, director and a scenographer, but mostly he was one of the most important art visionaries of the 20th century. He also excelled as an art theorist in his own right, and even though his career in arts started in the 19th century, he was already ahead of his time. Sadly, as with many timeless artists, they are only rarely appreciated and understood by their peers, as is the case with Appia. Cosima Wagner (1837–1930), the second wife of Richard Wagner,

even touted his views as “childish”. As history shows, this flawed human being could not be more wrong, all other transgressions notwithstanding.¹

Appia was by all accounts, an eccentric persona. He suffered a heavy stutter from his childhood, was a life-long alcoholic and a homosexual and often had suicidal thoughts. If not for his sister, Hélène, his impractical and shy personality wouldn't have enabled him to lead any semblance of a functioning day-to-day life. Hélène was his lifetime anchor, she took care of him, accompanied him on his foreign trips and helped to organize his life. Despite all his shortcomings, his creativity and fantasy was not stifled in the slightest, one could even argue his problems were his enabler.

Music was always at the centre of his artistic career. He went through multiple conservatoria in his youth, while finishing none of them – in his hometown Geneva, in Paris and even in Dresden. He also attended various internships in big opera houses in Dresden and Vienna. Due to his refined opera intuition and very fine taste, he was one of the few people who not only understood opera on a profound level, but also could take it, deconstruct and work with it systematically. He had a keen sense of diluting talent and quality from the rest and was able to create a hierarchy of opera writers. One of his early recognitions went to the composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883), whom he considered

to be an unparalleled master of the art, as not only was Wagner a genius musician, he was also a great art theorist, reformist and a creator of a unique and specific type of music drama form. He was the sole creator and user of the concept of “Gesamtkunstwerk”, a term for a work of art that makes use of all or many art forms and combines them into a single one. Appia, who grew up mostly on Wagner's operas and music dramas started to idolize him, as his work was the pinnacle of art to him. This feeling was further exacerbated when he met another Wagner connoisseur, Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855–1927). Both men would go on to affirm each other's opinions. The German opera composer was one of the few people who have had an extraordinary influence on European culture. He created exceptional music and reformed the contemporary opera by such a degree, that Giuseppe Verdi, who was his peer, could be regarded as a composer of popular opera. On the other hand, we find evidence of other composers with a complex depth in their work, like Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893), or the veristic Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924), but these are far too rare cases to be considered the norm. Wagner's wish was to be a recognizable force in the pursuit of creating an ode to the greatness of his nation, in which he succeeded.² Appia has completely absorbed everything about Wagner's work and be a creative human being, he was pursuing a way to introduce Wagner to the scene himself. He saw *Parsifal* in Bayreuth when he was only 20 years old, and 4 years



Festspielhaus, Bayreuth. Photo by Miloš Mistrík.

after that (1886), he made the trip again to see *Tristan und Isolde*. Additionally, he also attended the festival of Wagner's work in 1894 in Bayreuth. Of course, he also attended a plethora of other opera houses throughout these years, where he widened his views on various other opera productions. The Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, which was a theatre building created for the sole purpose of playing Wagner's work, was built in 1876. To fully grasp and interpret Wagner's work, it is necessary to deconstruct the way and the reason why the Festspielhaus was built. The fact that this was Wagner's home theatre stage meant not only that he had a hand in all aspects of theatre production, but also in the way the theatre was constructed and designed. His perception of society, life and arts seeps through the building itself, starting with the audience ground plan, which was designed to mirror a Greek amphitheatre. This meant, among many things, that a common practice to stratify the audience via lodges was abandoned, as Greek amphitheatres also do not have any lodges. The design of the amphitheatre also has an added benefit of great visibility of the stage from any angle. The idea of the amphitheatre was so paramount to Wagner, that he hinged a curtain above the audience, just like they

¹ One of her many problematic decisions encompassed the rule to stick to the original versions of staged Wagner's scripts, while being the head of the Bayreuthian festival. This conserved his works and made them old-timery, all in an age where Wagner's pieces could and should be used to modernize the opera.

² This was also exploited in the years before the 2nd World War in various propaganda pieces within the German Reich, but as Wagner died in 1883, he had no power over it anymore.



Festspielhaus, Bayreuth, amphitheater seats. Archive photo.

did in ancient Greece. The thing is, in ancient Greece, the curtains served to create protection from the midday sun for the audience, and the Festspielhaus had a rooftop. This meant that the curtain was purely symbolic in its nature here.

On the other hand, the rest of the building was structured in a more traditional way – the stage, governed by a large portal, was just opposite the audience seats. This was a traditional type of stage design, based on older Italian theatres.

Another invention could be seen in the orchestra design. Wagner did not want the audience's experience to be disturbed, and that is why this is the first theatre house in western Europe to "hide" the orchestra by using a hole between the stage and the seats. He was so meticulous, that he was not only able to hide the orchestra, but the conductor as well, even though he was required to direct the orchestra in a sitting position. Another peculiarity was that the floor gently sloped down from the conductor towards the space underneath the scene, which is exactly the opposite way when compared to modern theatres. This was done so not even the people sitting in the highest seats could be able to see the orchestra.

The walls on the audience's side were clad with carefully laid wooden tiles, which, in addition to great acoustic attributes were

almost invisible with ideal lighting conditions. Bayreuth had another novel thing – the audience lights were turned off during any play. This ensured an almost intimate communication between the actors and the audience and safeguarded the illusion of theatre, and as the theatre was electrified in 1888, the stage was sufficiently lit up even when the rest of the theater was clad in darkness. This was later opposed by Wagner's opponent Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), who preferred to turn to lights on during the plays, exactly because he wanted to stifle the illusion of theatre and wanted the audience to think about his work in a different, more rational way.³

Furthermore, the theatre's acoustic design is also worth mentioning. The centrepiece is a small wall separating the audience seats from the orchestra space. In this theatre, it has the shape of a half-circle enclosure, with a clam-shaped top and encompasses the whole width of the scene. The enclosure has 2 main effects – first of all, it acts like a visual divide and helps to hide the orchestra from the audience, but more importantly, it affects the acoustics from the orchestra. It is shaped in a way which breaks the sound waves coming from the orchestra. Normally, the sound would travel directly from the orchestra to the audience, but due to the clam-shaped top of the wall, it travels above the conductor, then into the depths of the scene and from there, after roughly 1.5 seconds, it shoots into the audience together with the singing from the stage. This enables an almost magic double-tone sound to exist, which makes people in the

audience feel almost a trembling of sorts. This sound, also called a "Bayreuther Mischklang" has so far not been reproduced in any other theatre to date.

Wagner's work concentrated on German mythology and history. It celebrates the virtue and greatness of the German spirit. This ties into the zeitgeist, as during the author's life, nationalistic topics were pretty popular, not only in Germany, but also in other cultural blocs. This was due to the whole nationalist spirit going through Europe at the time, which meant that many nations



An example of a theatrical practice that Adolphe Appia completely rejected. Un-natural dramatic gestures, a static mise en scene, painted scenery in the background, lighting which used a sole static lightsource. Shot from the production of the opera Lucia di Lammermoor, 1908. Archive photo.

were starting to form or demand their birthrights and some wars were waged solely on the principle of nationalism. This was the same for Germany and Italy, the Czech Republic and Poland, Hungary and Romania, even though it is important to distinguish between the aggressors and the nations that were trying to free themselves, as with the conflict of the Slovak nation and Hungary.

Coinciding with the nationalism movement in Europe, most of the art stemming from these times has adopted the romantic canon. On one hand, this came in pretty handy, but also the adoption was fairly



Adolphe Appia, sketch for Die Walküre by Richard Wagner, 1892. Photo by Fondation SAPA Bern.

organic. All of the abovementioned amenities of the Festspielhaus were utilized predominantly when showing romantic operas. The body of work by Richard Wagner is also usually defined as romantic as well. It is a magical, majestic type of music, full of fantasy and in stark contrast to the later realistic verism or to the conflicting dodecaphonic and atonal future avantgarde music. Wagner's sound and architecture complement each other. Appia was not only fascinated by the music itself, but also by the ideology behind Wagner's works, which celebrated the German race. Appia, who himself came from the francophone part of Switzerland, felt an enormous attraction to German culture, and longed for tying the French and the German together. This is why he studied the different approaches of German and Roman cultures to music and art and found characteristic disadvantages and advantages of

The first reform phase and Richard Wagner

After Appia encroached himself with Wagner's works, he discovered a grave disproportion concerning the way his works were directed on the stage. The problem was, that theatres, including the one in Bayreuth, were still entrenched in putting up the stage in a pseudorealistic style, which was absolutely not how Wagner would envision his work to be staged, as this style was neither romantic, nor truthful. Appia then started to question why Wagner would go such lengths in constructing such an awe-inspiring theatre only to squander everything on suboptimal scenography and direction of his plays? The beautiful music and heroic stories were put on a stage, which was dominated by terribly painted 2-dimensional scenery full of needless drawn-up details (windows, wall stucco, painted curtains, trees or pots). The drapes of the scene would tremble every time the actors would walk past them, they would deteriorate the light and sound coming from the stage and would appear to be disruptive to the living actors on the stage with them. The stage floor was just that – a wooden floor. Not a small forest path, or a paved road in a city, further disrupting the stage as a whole. The actors would often have to step over bags of sand, as these bags were there to ensure that the drapes would stay stretched out. And then the actors themselves, who did not seem to care about the work or their acting, would try to appeal to the audience by wearing more and more layers of extravagant costumes, which would hardly ever correspond to the shown play or characters. Lighting was only used sparingly, mostly as a distributed, low level light that would be almost unnoticeable. This also meant that the actors'

³ KNOPOVÁ, E.: Bertolt Brecht v slovenskom divadle v rokoch 1975–1985. In Slovenské divadlo, 2020, Vol. 68, No. 2, p. 122.

⁴ APPIA, A.: Latins et Germains. In Oeuvres complètes, Tome II., 1895 – 1905. Société suisse du théâtre. Lausanne : L'Âge d'homme, 1986, p. 145.

shadows would ensure that the perspective of size between the actor's body and their shadow would be impossible to stay consistent. And to top it off, the way the actors portrayed the characters by using poor gesticulation, declamation and poor singing, which all contributed to a "destruction of the decors". All this was in direct opposition to everything that Wagner stood for in his music and aesthetic views. Even though he is described as a romanticist, Wagner knew how to set and keep his plays in a more grounded, realistic setting, e.g. by utilizing the "Sprechgesang", which made old, artificial-sounding singing, sound like a singed dramatical voice (something akin to parlando).

The Swiss reformist Appia was absolutely sure that this situation was in need of correcting, as the current situation was a clear detriment to Wagner's work. The problem was, Wagner died in 1883, which was when Appia was still only developing his own skillset and views, so it was impossible to get his blessing for these changes. But even so, Appia publicly showed his proposed changes in 1891. Unfortunately, he could not show how these changes would translate into actual staged opera, because the theatre in Bayreuth soundly declined his application to direct any of Wagner's plays.⁵ As he could not direct, he had no other choice but to write his opinions down in paper form, so he started to write and draw sketches. This culminated in his brochure "*La mise en scène du drame wagnérien*" (The Staging of the Wagnerian Drama), which came out in 1895 in Paris. Appia, unsure if he would have any other opportunity to present the public



Adolphe Appia, romantic scene design for Die Walküre by Richard Wagner, 1892. Photo by Fondation SAPA Bern.

with his opinions, hastily put this brochure together, sans any illustrations. Fortunately, in 1899 he took another opportunity to refine his written work in his definitive theoretical take on Wagner - "*Die Musik und die Inszenierung*" (Musique et mise en scène; Music and the Art of the Theatre), which came out in Munich. This book's influence was tremendous and truly led to a different way of thinking of stage setting and stage play of Wagner's dramas. And almost incidentally, with this work, Appia qualified to be one of the founders of modern direction of theatrical work, which is that of a more supportive element, centered on art and organization, of the theatrical synthesis.

When the Swiss director and scenographer started to formulate how to change the scene setting practice of Wagner's plays, he started with his definition of music. The problem was, music never exists by itself and by definition has to be coupled with singing, which, by Wagner's composition setting, is immutable. So, to clear

any potential disruptive elements to the immutable factors, he started to redefine the scenery first. 2-dimensional, flat painted sceneries were categorically discarded, as Appia preferred 3-dimensional spaces occupied by the actors and/or singers, which would change according to the situation. The idea was that the people not only belong to this space, but also have to complement it with their presence. Gone were also the old, degraded, wooden picture frames and hanging curtains. The scenery pieces cut out a specific place in which the actors would be able to move. These were also not geometrically symmetrical, but asymmetrical with various shapes, as is the case in nature. Finally, paintings were only used sparsely.

Appia was also a pioneer in using electrical lighting in theatres. He thought of it as a novel way of artistic expression, which no one before had yet used properly in theatre. In Appia's hands though, this became one of his strongest tools within the visual design of scene setting. The old dim lights

were changed for one-directional lights, which could concentrate light beams onto a single spot on the stage, as well as moving lights, which would be able to partake in the action on stage. Finally, Appia also used multicoloured lights, which were changed by switching out various filters. This is the reason why paintings were not used anymore - they became obsolete, as lights conveyed the connection



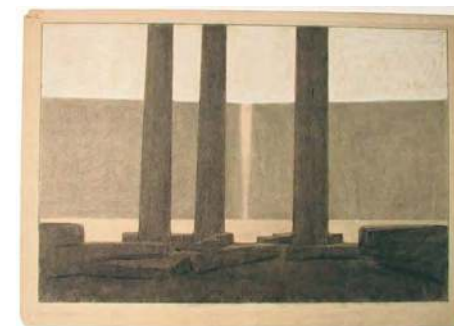
Adolphe Appia, Scherzo, 1910. Rhythmic space. Photo by Fondation SAPA Bern.

between music and space much better than paintings ever could. As we can see in his sketches, Appia's early stage space designs till 1909 were concocted to be an abstraction, albeit one of the real world. We can clearly spot visual references to nature, forests, meadows or even the seat of the gods, even though heavily stylized. Although they did converge with the music, they were not doing it in the way envisioned by Wagner, as a Gesamtkunstwerk. Appia's designs were far more abstract and made them lose their base characteristics and could probably not be considered an art form in itself anymore. This, especially with later iterations of his idealistic mise en scene design, he later called "living art".

Appia's fictitious mise en scenes, which only existed in a written and sketched form, were not in a contrast to what Wagner did with music though - just the opposite. They complemented and made it possible to physically manifest the idea of the German greatness, romantic tragedy or the great German proudness. Here we can see that Appia could not completely break off the chains of the 19th century art traditions that constrained some of his thinking, even though he did try. We can see some glimpses of what the future held though, and these glimpses seeped through and inspired what would become the modern and avantgarde movement in art which started in the early 20th century and basically went on to inspire art until the present day, and not just theatre art, but all audiovisual forms of art seen nowadays in electronic media.

The second reform phase and Jaques-Dalcroze

Appia dedicated almost half his life to Wagner, even though the Bayreuth theatre shunned him publicly at the beginning of his career. This meant that some form of fatigue had to set in. We can observe that his fascination with Wagner faded, which happened after his disagreements with Chamberlain in 1905. After that he discovered (in 1906) the idea of eurythmy, which was taught by Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950). This new discovery finally led him to shed all 19th century preconceptions and led Appia to the ideas of the industrial 20th century. Jaques-Dalcroze was a music teacher in Geneva, and his discovery was very simple in its base idea. While teaching, he observed that his students had a much easier time learning music when they coupled it with physical movement, gesturing



Adolphe Appia, Les dernières colonnes de la forêt, 1909. Rhythmic space. Photo Fondation SAPA Bern.

and actions. His eurythmic teaching method⁶ was used not only during his lessons, but Jaques-Dalcroze used to teach it in public seminars as well, which is exactly how Appia was shown this method, seemingly almost by pure luck. What Appia saw that Jaques-Dalcroze did not however, was that there was a large amount of the theatrical and acting in eurythmics, and that this could be a breakthrough in his own research on theatre. This led to a mutual artistic friendship between these two men. They used to complement each other's work and as Appia correctly predicted, both their works would start to converge in theatre art. In 1909, Appia's sketches definitely transformed into what he called "rhythmic spaces". These were either scenography graphs of plays that were not yet produced live, which did not include exclusively Wagner's work anymore, or they were purely abstract paintings, devoid of romanticism or mimesis. They did not hold any ideology or any descriptive parts. These were a precursor to cubism and constructivism. They expressed an era which would free human

⁵ This has been shown to be another mistake, as history shows Appia was right in the end.

⁶ This term was first coined by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925).

individuality and enable free space and movement and supported a cult of health and body. This was a zeitgeist movement at that time and served as a form of early stage of an ecological approach to a life on Earth. This was probably best shown in the inception of the modern-age Olympic Games in 1896. This was also a time when Appia definitely shied away from nationalistic ideas and went a separate way from Chamberlain. The Englishman fully embraced national socialism, while Appia's idealism went further into an open, healthy, playful and free community. This is when he wrote: "...the decorations stem from a temporary period between Wagner's romanticism and my freeing from it."⁷

Rhythmic spaces used mostly a play on shapes and light. They were mostly made up of moving parts, practicables, parallel platforms, whose main reason was not to describe, but to support a movement. They would cut out specific parts of the stage, sometimes these were staircase set, platform combinations, tall hollow tubes⁸, or artificial pathways with variable lengths and various escape passages. They were built in a robust way, which meant that actors could move on them freely, jump on them, lean on them, lie on them, and do whatever was necessary to express their body language. Appia toned this with various sophisticated lighting effects using movement and contrast. The scenes appeared in a very material way, but on the other hand they were very malleable and variable as well, all depending



Adolphe Appia, mise en scene design for Iphigénie en Tauride by Christoph Willibald Gluck, 1926. Photo by Fondation SAPA Bern.

on the music that was currently playing. It was no coincidence, that a rhythmic space Appia devised in 1910, called *Scherzo*, which is widely regarded as Appia's best work to date, is a name for a musically light and humorous art format.

It is obvious now that the duo of Appia and Jaques-Dalcroze did in fact transition into theatre in 1911, when they were invited to Hellerau, Germany where they were tasked to create a eurythmic school, in which they were supposed to stage plays with their students. But their work was cut short, as the Great War started in 1914. Right at the beginning, the Germans bombarded the gothic Cathedral in Rheims, which prompted an open petition, signed by most European intellectuals, including Jaques-Dalcroze. As he was unwilling to take his signature back, he was expelled from Hellerau, which meant that the school as a whole was closed down. The school never opened in its pre-war state after that.

Appia seemed to be unfazed by this, as he continued his work, and managed to land a few directing and scenographic jobs in theatre. His biggest achievement was when he was invited to work at the Milanese La Scala by Arturo Toscanini (1867–1957) in 1923. However, Appia evaluated the result of this cooperation as a "big catastrophe".

This is why he continued to work mostly as a sketch artist and as a writer. His most important work from this stage of his life is a book "*L'œuvre d'art vivant*" (The Work of Living Art, 1921) in which he introduced the concept of „living art“, in which the audience joins the actors in a conjoined performance, creating a beauty ritual of sorts. This was the end of one of the lines which started as a fascination with Wagner. The first line was Appia's – he started with a vivid fascination and idolization of Wagner and romanticism, but moved on to reform the theatre as an art form, eurythmic and the cult of humanity up until it became a free, modern art work. On the other hand, Chamberlain's approach, which started with the same fascination of Wagner, led him to pursue romanticism, German monumentalism, becoming nazism.

⁷ APPIA, A.: *L'Oeuvre d'art vivant*. In *Oeuvres complètes*, Tome III., 1906 – 1921. Société suisse du théâtre. Lausanne : L'Âge d'homme, 1988, p. 409.

⁸ These were not so different from Craig's screens.

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