

"Trilogie der Frauen"

Erwartung, Schoenberg/ *Le Bal*, Strasnoy/ *Das Gehege*, Rihm

Hamburgische Staatsoper

7th March, 2010

What It Feels Like for a Girl

A longish program of two contemporary operas plus one drama by notorious box-office poison Arnold Schoenberg isn't the easiest sell for an opera house. Indeed, the opening night of Hamburg's brilliantly contrasting collection, entitled "*Trilogie der Frauen*", was sadly not quite sold out. Those fearless and fortunate enough to have been in attendance, however, were treated to an evening of vibrant theater, great singing, and one delicious discovery, Oscar Strasnoy's *Le Bal*, which had its World Premiere on this night.

The thematic links between these three one-act operas are somewhat tenuous, though the director Matthew Jocelyn has stated that the common thread of the three central women in the Trilogy is their passionate, solitary struggle against apathy. And so Mr. Jocelyn has taken up their cause himself, successfully (to judge by the enthusiastic applause) battling the cynicism of modern directorial trends and opening-night opera crowds alike. There are no gimmicks or soap-boxes in Mr. Jocelyn's presentation, no ironic detachment. In place of wry commentary he gives us full-blooded engagement, something that many directors might shy away from in confronting pieces of such raw and extreme emotion (in the case of the Schoenberg and Rihm) or the requirements of precisely choreographed farce (in the case of *Le Bal*).

The impassioned and personal performances of this evening also reminded us of why we love a diva. "*Trilogie der Frauen*" provides the special pleasure of no less than three great divas flaunting their stuff: Ms. Polaski offering a heartbreaking martyr to love; Ms. Gordon-Stewart a glittering and monstrous mother on the verge of a nervous breakdown; and Ms. Kwon a warrior facing down the demons of her inner nature, axe in hand.

In his own words, Schoenberg set out in *Erwartung* "to represent in slow motion everything that occurs during a single second of maximum spiritual excitement, stretching it out to half an hour." And so his mini-drama for solo soprano is intended to be not so much a sequential story as a dissection of an ecstatic moment: your life flashing before your eyes in the instant of your death.

It is the challenge of director and singer alike to convert Schoenberg's Proustian experiment into a quasi-narrative for the operatic stage, and one felt in this interpretation that a respectful balance had been struck between the psychological/metaphorical and the literal. Without revealing too much of the concept (which unfolds gradually), I can state that we find "Die Frau" in a cold, clinical space, surrounded by glass walls and attended by armed guards and medical professionals. Although Schoenberg specified that he wanted an actual forest on the stage to properly express the dark horror of the tale (the site of her lover's murder), the greenish light and glinting instruments of the operating room were an effective modern translation of the original Gothic.



Photos courtesy of: Hamburgische Staatsoper

Deborah Polaski's portrayal was deeply sincere and sympathetic to her tortured protagonist; her voice possesses a richness and clarity, especially in the lower registers, and easily projected through the wondrously shape-shifting landscapes of the orchestra. She held the audience's attention throughout, and one felt increasing panic and menace as her end drew near (aided by the subtly effective staging of the supernumeraries). As she takes her last breath and Schoenberg's woodwinds warble heavenwards, we die with her for an instant, no longer mere observers, surprised to discover that we have crossed to the other side of the glass.

Those glass walls of Alain Lagarde's efficiently evocative set were the one element remaining as the stage was transformed into the home of the arrivistes Kampf family of 1920s Paris, replete with red silken wallpaper and gilt japonaica. Thus we began the second act of the night, Oscar Strasnoy's surprisingly delightful, sharp-witted comedy piece, *Le Bal* (based on the 1930 novella by Irène Némirovsky, with libretto by the director). I say "surprisingly" because one does not expect a new opera by a little-known composer to be—to put it plainly—so good.

Mr. Strasnoy has accomplished that rarest compositional feat: here is a work—a one-act fable about a daughter's revenge on her self-obsessed mother—that has an original musical voice, that maintains dramatic tension, and that manages to be genuinely hilarious and bitingly observant at the same time. I cannot remember the last time I laughed so much at the opera. Much credit is due to the director, who boldly staged the piece in an absurdist and very Gallic manner, and even more is due to the impressive ensemble cast, who performed Strasnoy's challenging score with fearless energy and comic abandon.

Most salient in this regard was Miriam Gordon-Stewart as the hysterical mother Rosine Kampf, the dominant figure of the opera. The unrelenting intensity—not to mention the impeccably stylish comedy—of Ms. Gordon-Stewart's performance grabs us from her first storming on stage to her final, self-pitying collapse. Of all the singers, she was also the most successful at freeing the score from the page, transforming the rapid-fire arpeggiation of the vocal writing into outpourings of Mme. Kampf's narcissistic mania.

Mr. Strasnoy's score seems especially demanding in its rhythmic complexity (as well as in the wide vocal ranges required of all of the singers). Polymeters, syncopations and a kind of asymmetrical counterpoint abound. And, rare for a young composer, he is not afraid to use silences, often to great dramatic effect. The sound-world of the orchestration is tinged with lighthearted 1920s flavor (banjo, accordion, jazzy clarinets), and a fascinating blend of percussion and sighing strings

evoke the rusty mechanization of the early twentieth century. The overall effect lies thrillingly somewhere between Berio, Varèse, and Weill.

Another memorable cast member was the bright-voiced Trine W. Lund, as the daughter Antoinette, who offered a well-observed reading of an oppressed young adolescent, full of spite and giddy at her first taste of power. Strasnoy and Jocelyn brilliantly present the solipsistic world of the Kampf household as seen through a fourteen-year-old's eyes: the grown-ups and their behaviors are alternately mysterious, grotesque, and alluring. They drink and drink and smoke and use dirty, incomprehensible words (especially the earthy Irish nanny, sung with womanly gusto by Ann-Beth Solvang).

Strasnoy's use of punctuated, deconstructed dance rhythms and repeated, motivic text serve to represent the grown-ups' behavior as something slightly exotic, ritualistic, whose meaning is just beyond our (or, Antoinette's) grasp.

I also appreciated the subtle interweaving of the role of female sexuality into the drama, so central to Némirovsky's original story. It is Antoinette's first stirrings of pubescent arousal (teasingly encouraged by the butler) that give rise to her reckless act of revenge upon her mother. The mother herself feels she was entrapped through an unwanted pregnancy into a loveless marriage, and fantasizes that a princely guest at her ball may yet offer her salvation. Her poignant aria makes us reexamine the glass walls encasing her living room: the glamorous but empty Mme. Kampf is a woman forever on display who can exist only in the approving or desiring gaze of others.

The two male singers in the evening of the Trilogy of Women, Peter Galliard as Alfred Kampf and Moritz Gogg as the butler Georges, also deserve special notice for their excellently crafted performances. Mr. Galliard (aided by some witty Mahlerian references in the score) struck the right note of satirically dated "Jewishness", and Mr. Gogg's menacing servant filled out the comic ensemble with panache.

The final chapter of the evening, Wolfgang Rihm's probing but heavy-handed *Das Gebege* (The Aviary), also presents the soul (of a people) as an animal caged in glass: in Jocelyn and Lagarde's production, as a large, skeletal statue of an eagle, the symbol of Germany, displayed in some kind of natural history (?) museum. A skulking, muscular young man with a shaved head has taken up residence in the rib-cage of the beast, whose enclosure he has littered with crumpled beer cans and discarded military uniforms from centuries of Germany's wars.

The protagonist of the story, sung with verve and admirable vocal stamina by Hellen Kwon, finds herself alone in the museum on the night of the Berlin Wall's collapse in 1989, and the drama consists of her one-way dialogue with the soul of the animal (the skulking squatter), whom she eventually cajoles out of its cage, only to murder it.

In short, the piece explores the same question that a German friend of mine once asked: "What is wrong with the Germans?" But what is interesting about Rihm's (and playwright Botho Strauß's) response to this is that, even as the piece is steeped in intellectual allegory, the music itself and the quest of the woman are deeply, primarily emotional, even sexual. What Rihm gives us is a tonal portrait of the postwar German psyche: dark and self-punishing, to be sure, but also full of longing for the lost ecstasies of the beautiful, the feminine, the lush: for the vanished world of Richard Strauss.

Rihm both grants his German audience permission to feel this longing ("You should long for this!" the woman exhorts in one atypically lyrical passage) while insisting through his own aggressive atonality and extreme vocal writing that its satisfaction is no longer to be found. The woman's cries at the end for the comforting forest of German myth (and of Schoenbergian horror) are met with an echoing, black void. The walls have fallen at last . . . but what lies behind them? Is the beast vanquished, or has it merely escaped?

Bottom line: Powerful doses of darkness and lightness alike.

response to this review: response@operaticus.com

Production Credits

Conductor - Simone Young
Director - Matthew Jocelyn
Set & Costume - Alain Lagarde
Lighting - Roberto Venturi
Choreography - Kristin Shaw Minges

Cast

Erwartung

Die Frau - Deborah Polaski

Le Bal

Antoinette - Trine W. Lund
Rosine Kampf - Miriam Gordon-Stewart
Alfred Kampf - Peter Galliard
Mlle. Isabelle - Miriam Clark
Miss Betty - Ann-Beth Solvang
Georges - Moritz Gogg

Das Gehege

Die Frau - Hellen Kwon
Der Adler - Marco Stichel

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION: <http://www.staatsoper-hamburg.de/>