

Donata Premeru

**THE NINTH INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF NEW MUSIC THEATRE**

Composer Hans Werner Henze initiated the biennial International Festival of New Music Theatre in Munich in 1988. Composer and conductor Peter Ruzicka, long-standing artistic director of the Hamburg Opera and for the past two years also the artistic director of the Salzburg Festival, took over the artistic management from H. W. Henze in 1996. Six new musical-theatrical works were commissioned each year for the Festival, which is thematically conceived. The Eighth Biennale, the most recent one held, musically presented *virtual reality*; the motto of the next one is *Resistance* (Widerständigkeit), while the main theme this year was ‘... into the unknown’ (In die Fremde) – with the explanation that, in the movement of globalization, encounters with unknown, foreign, and even incompatible elements are a common occurrence, but that ‘the unknown’ is increasingly neutralized by meeting and familiarizing. And we were meant to experience that on the music stage as well. This year’s experiences were very interesting, even exciting. The five ‘operas’ by composers from Austria, China, Lithuania, France and Great Britain that were premiered at the Biennale responded to the very diversely understood challenge both in content and the use of musical means of expression.

Between May 12<sup>th</sup> and the 28<sup>th</sup>, the Munich Biennale marked its 50<sup>th</sup> world premiere with the last opera to be performed this year (Brian Ferneyhough: *Shadowtime*). Traditionally, before each premiere (with two reprises) discussions with composers were organized (with Petar Ruzicka acting as moderator), concerts in the cycle *Klangspuren* (Sound Traces) were held, the renowned Munich Philharmonic performed, several recitals were held, and on May 21<sup>st</sup> an interdisciplinary symposium on the same topic was held (in the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts).

A reunion with the many guests and journalists from all over the world was organized every time in another of the numerous, renowned stages and halls with long-standing tradition: the Gartnerplatz Theatre, *Prinzregententheater* (whose interior is an exact replica of Wagner’s *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth), the magnificent *Hercules Saal* ... The Great State Theatre, that is, Opera (with 350 years of tradition) and the miniature 250-year-old gem of Rococo theatre, the *Cuvilliés*, were left out for understandable reasons.

*Berenice*, an impressive chamber opera by Johannes Maria Staud, a young 30-year-old Austrian composer, opened the Festival at the Gartnerplatz Theater on May 12<sup>th</sup>. It was followed by Qu Xiao-Song’s Chinese opera tale *Temptation* in the *Carl Orff* Hall of the *Gesteig* concert complex, and then by an outstanding contemporary theatrical happening, the *Cantio* by the Lithuanian Vykintas Baltakas, a true contemporary theatre happening, then an unusual ‘silent’ opera performance “...22,13...” by the Frenchman

Mark André, while the last and most eagerly anticipated work was *Shadowtime*, the first ‘opera’ of 61-year-old Englishman Brian Ferneyhough, which is not a theatrical spectacle, but rather as the author calls it, a “Gedankenoper” – an “Opera of Thoughts”.

The opera *Berenice* by young Staud is bizarre in terms of its content, a real ‘horror story’ based on Edgar Allan Poe. Berenice and Egaeus live in the same house and are completely different, both regarding their temperaments and their affinities: she is cheerful, full of life and always smiling, while he is a withdrawn sombre bookworm. They fall in love and get married. Berenice soon dies of tuberculosis and Egaeus, fascinated by her sparkling teeth, pulls them from the corpse. Although it was excellently staged and dramaturgically and visually very convincing, it held you at a distance and emotionally uninvolved. Namely, it was written in cabaret style, the horror was underlined by electronic music, while a video recording accompanied all the events associatively. In addition to the singer, the dual character of Egaeus was also played by an actor. The show was already performed at the *Vienna Festival* and will also be seen by a Berlin audience in the autumn. The part of Berenice was performed by soprano Dorothee Miels and Aegeus by bass-baritone Otto Katzameier. The *Klangforum Wien* ensemble was conducted by Stefan Asbury.

A work that was completely different, scenically very effective, textually very committed and full of Bruegelian humour and vitality was the chamber opera, or more precisely, music theatre *Cantio* (May 18<sup>th</sup>) by the young 32-year-old Lithuanian, Vykintas Baltakas – also a commission from the Munich Biennale made in co-production with the Lithuanian Theatre in Vilnius. In Munich, it was performed in the *House of Art* (Haus der Kunst) theatre. Librettist Sharon Lynn Joyce, a regular collaborator of the composer, combined the Lithuanian and Ancient Greek languages (the people’s healthy way of thinking and hymn-like rhetoric) when representing the ancient ritual (by singing Menander’s hymn) of saying farewell to/detaining the gods in the city because their lives depend on them. Both the comments of the people and the question “Is it necessary to hail hymns to the gods (‘politicians’)?” were witty. The intelligently and succinctly spoken (sung) text (subtitled in German) radiates permanent topicality and affects the audience by its weight, while the modern, very expressive music, both effective and focused, is reinforced by multilayered and comical stage solutions. This short 60-minute-long chamber opera is politically committed and it is one of the high points of this year’s Munich Biennale. Excellent soloists, actors, mimes, dancers and ballet dancers with the participation of members of the Munich chamber orchestra performed a mini-version of Ligetti’s great ‘operatic wonder’ *Le Grand Macabre*. The performance was led by the chief conductor of the Munich chamber orchestra, Christoph Poppen.

Just as we were surprised by the music of the next ‘opera’ (at the Muffat Halle on May 20<sup>th</sup>) “...22,13...”, by Mark André, also entitled *Music-theatre Passion in Three Parts for 4 Instrumental Groups* (arranged throughout the hall), *Seven Performers and Live Electronics*, so were we thrilled by its staging. Namely, the human drama, the suffering (of individuals, refugees, prisoners in a concentration camp), is

presented strikingly, with 7 characters and minimum stage activity, but without singing, silently – the only thing heard (without the high strings and winds) is the obscured murmur of voices and instruments with an occasional scream accompanied by percussions and winds with live electronics in new software technology. The title “...22,13...” refers to the text from Chapter 22 of the Passion according to John whose Verse 13 reads *I am Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End*. The most eagerly awaited opera at this year’s Munich Biennale, Brian Ferneyhough’s *Shadowtime* (at the *Prinzregententheater* on May 25<sup>th</sup>) left us feeling confused. The stage action takes place in seven independent musically complete wholes – one is a concerto for guitar, and the other for piano! Although the author gave his explanations, the question remains. The ‘opera’ lasts over two hours and seems longer than expected. The music is very complex (New Complexity), highly intellectual, more contemplative (it befits the subtitle) than incidental, and it did not correspond with the stage. Probably due to the insufficiently imaginative and thought-out direction – the basic postulates of stage space were not observed (which is otherwise proven by the successful staging of Bach’s and Handel’s Passions and oratorios, and even masses); and it is about a tragic moment in more recent European history, when famous Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin committed suicide on the Spanish border in September 1940 because he could not emigrate to America. And so Charles Bernstein’s excellently prepared script for this opera subtitled *Thought Opera* was left without the expected visual commentary. The performance was realized by the sensational *New Vocal Soloists* from Stuttgart (as the choir) and their member, the impressive bass-baritone Andreas Fischer in several roles, and by the members of the *New Ensemble* from Amsterdam, accompanied by video projections and electronic tape (produced in the Parisian IRCAM). The protagonists had doubles in this case as well, not actors but monstrous stuffed white dolls without a physiognomy. This ‘thought opera’ will also be performed, in co-production with the London-based *Sadler’s Wells Opera* and the *English National Opera*, at the *Paris Autumn Festival* in October, and in New York and at the Triennial in Ruhr, Germany, in 2005.

The opera that was closest to this year’s theme ‘...into the unknown’ was *Temptation (Versuchung)* by Qu Xiao-Song of China, which was performed in Munich by the *Berlin Contemporary Opera*, as its second commission from the same author so far. After having spent 10 years in New York, composer Qu has returned to China where he teaches composition at the Conservatory in Shanghai. He does not believe in the possibility of a quick merging of Eastern and Western cultures and although in his opera *Temptation/Trial/Testing* those two traditions do exist in one work, they do not succeed in finding a common language. A traditional Chinese story about a wise man that has experienced the *Nothingness of both Fame and Life and Love*, sung in Chinese (the sensational Wu Bixia, soprano), lasts 100 minutes and, in addition to several indispensable, traditional Chinese instruments, the singers-soloists are accompanied by European string players. The music is impressive when it depicts different emotional states, waiting, emotional and physical pain... while the silence between the long sung monologues is the essence of music speech!

However, the opera seems fragmentary, and as a whole, it did not convince us of the possibility of merging these two diametrically different cultures. Using postmodernist techniques of quotation, Tan Dun had achieved this masterfully with his opera *Marco Polo*, which was premiered at the same Biennale in Munich in 1996 (a new production of the opera was performed at the Zagreb Biennale in 2001 and is currently running in Sydney, Australia).

And to conclude: it was wisely said, 'what remains at the end of everything is the realization that the unknown, the foreign, is not far from us, it is in fact in ourselves'.

Translated by Jelena Nikezić