

# European Stages

Volume 24, Number 2

## Report from the Bregenz Festival of 2013

Glenn Loney

### **André Tchaikovsky's *Der Kaufmann von Venedig***

Not so long ago, the Bregenz-Festival premiered Weinberg's *Der Passagier*, a previously-unknown Auschwitz-centered opera, by a previously-unknown Eastern Jewish-Soviet composer. Would Polish-Jewish composer André Tchaikovsky's *Der Kaufmann von Venedig* prove another such discovery?

In the event, not really, although a reprise of this expensively mounted staging was promised for Poland, which also provided extensive lobby displays dealing with the plight of the Jews in the arts in Poland during the Nazi occupation.

Fortunately, the composer's grandmother rescued him from the round-ups by dressing him up as a very blonde little girl. He made his way to England, making a very successful career as a concert pianist, but his dream was to succeed as a composer and he worked for most of his life on his *Merchant of Venice* opera. The major problem with this work is not that it has been awkwardly adapted for the opera stage, but that its pounding, thumping, dissonant score is not really very *singable*.

This staged version, by Keith Warner, opens with a troubled Antonio having a session with Dr. Sigmund Freud, a very odd invention. The most egregious of Warner's many visual innovations was his staging of the famous casket scene. For some reason, Warner chose to set this in an English maze, with a slanting mirror above so that the audience could see all the supposedly hilarious hi-jinx that were going on in and out of the maze. Instead of three small caskets, with important contents inside, what looked like three large outhouses—or gold, silver, and lead refrigerators—were mounted at three points on top of the maze. When the first suitor made the wrong choice, the door of that outhouse was left hanging open, surely a cue to his successor that that giant casket was out of play! Meanwhile, Portia and Nerissa—back from saving Antonio from Shylock's knife—were lounging in the foreground in lawn-chairs, savoring cocktails, just like fashionable ladies in a Noel Coward comedy.

Shylock's Venice—as imagined by Designer Ashley Martin-Davis—seemed to be made of walls of safe-deposit boxes. Somewhere in the proceedings there were Hitler youths, echoes of the Spanish Inquisition, and even an evocation of Marlene Dietrich. Erik Nielsen valiantly conducted.

Pountney was not content to celebrate André Tchaikovsky with an expensively staged production of his only opera, he also introduced the Tchaikovsky Shakespeare sonnet cycle and had the selected sonnets—none of them among the most memorable—read in both English and German by an actress in the Bregenz Theatre ensemble. As a prelude, Polish pianist Maciej Grzybowski played ten inventions that Tchaikovsky had composed, each to specially salute personal friends, and after the sonnet readings, Grzybowski accompanied Soprano Urszula Kryger, whose task it was to sing the lyrics. This she did more or less *between* the crashing chords of the settings.