

By continuing to use this site you consent to the use of cookies on your device as described in our [cookie policy](#) unless you have disabled them. You can change your [cookie settings](#) at any time but parts of our site will not function correctly without them.



FINANCIAL TIMES

July 22, 2013 5:30 pm

The Merchant of Venice, Bregenz Festival, Austria – review

By Shirley Apthorp

André Tchaikowsky's opera receives its world premiere with a finely judged staging by Keith Warner



'The Merchant of Venice' with Christopher Ainslie, right, as Antonio

André Tchaikowsky gave his pound of flesh, in the form of three traumatic operations when he was seven years old to reverse his circumcision. A Polish Jew, he lost his mother and was hidden by his grandmother during the second world war, and the experience left more than just physical scars.

In his will, he bequeathed his skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company, for use in performances of *Hamlet*. But Tchaikowsky also paid a weightier tribute to the Bard, in the form of his opera on *The Merchant of Venice*, given its posthumous world premiere last week in Bregenz.

The Polish Tchaikowsky was no relation to his Russian namesake. Born in 1935 as Robert Andrzej Krauthammer, he displayed phenomenal musical talent; the assumed name was probably his grandmother's vote for his future as well as a trick to ensure his survival. After the war, his talent earned him a number of spectacular competition victories, as well as lessons with the likes of Arthur Rubinstein and Nadia Boulanger.

Despite his immense success as an international concert pianist, Tchaikowsky's real passion was for composition. When he died in Oxford at the age of 46, he left the almost-completed *Merchant of Venice*, a work on which he had spent a quarter of a century. It has taken more than three decades and the conviction of departing Bregenz Festival director David Pountney that Tchaikowsky's opera is worth hearing for the piece to reach the stage.

Bregenz, with the support of Poland's Adam Mickiewicz Institute, has thrown every imaginable resource at this exhumation to ensure its success. And the results are striking. Director Keith Warner and designer Ashley Martin-Davis update Shakespeare's tale (adapted for the opera with immense sensitivity by John O'Brien, who was present at Thursday's premiere) to a time that could be the end of the 19th century, bookending it with Antonio on a psychiatrist's couch. Shylock, Antonio and the three pairs of lovers exist in a world of precarious banking and brewing anti-Semitism. Warner's staging treads a fine line between harsh cruelty and levity, with a good mix of clarity and complexity.

That is also a fair description of Tchaikowsky's music, which defies attribution to any one definite style of 20th-century composition. The score is intricate and dark, with moments of both brutality and lyricism, not to mention flashes of acerbic wit. Shakespeare's theme of the tension between mercy and justice fascinated the composer. It is hard to imagine who else could have set this opera with such lack of pathos and so refined a sense of ambivalence.

One of Bregenz's great assets is Erik Nielsen, who conducts with an ideal combination of structured intelligence, sensitivity and wisdom. He gives the piece all the care it needs to work, performing miracles of balance even when Tchaikovsky's vocal lines tangle awkwardly with over-scored orchestration – had he lived to hear rehearsals, the composer may well have made some changes.

Bregenz has assembled an elite cast for the occasion, and all the roles are well sung, from Adrian Eröd's poignant Shylock to Charles Workman's noble Bassanio. Pountney believes that this opera deserves a central place in the 20th-century canon; this production makes a strong case for his claim.



www.bregenzerfestspiele.com

Most Popular on Social Networks

Raghuram Rajan to head up India central bank

America is being left behind by energy innovators

Russian court cuts Mikhail Khodorkovsky's prison sentence

Forget 'taper' risk: China is a bigger threat

Australia cuts rates to record low

Sale best thing for the paper, Graham says

Washington Post sold to Jeff Bezos for \$250m

Cameron set to end experiment of part-time civil service head

UK sets pace of recovery among major economies

Even great political strategists barely affect elections

Make haste slowly on UK shale gas

The problem with Italian politics is bigger than Berlusconi

Demand for luxury residences goes sky-high in New York

'You can match tasks to your circadian rhythms'

Contradictory rules push banks to be riskier

Turkey's Ergenekon trial: Q&A

Choice of next Fed chair opens old Democrat wounds

Danny Alexander accused of protecting constituency from austerity

Miners return to hedging as gold prices lose shine

Apple import veto risks undermining patent protection push

Printed from:

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute

to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2013 FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.