

Polish Composer's Masterpiece Premiered after 31 Years

Anna S. Debowska - July 23, 2013



"The Merchant of Venice" at the festival in Bregenz (Photo Bregenzer Festspiele / Karl Forster)

The real bombshell of the Bregenzer Festspiele in Austria was "The Merchant of Venice." This was the first time the opera by Andrzej Czajkowski – an eccentric piano genius and survivor of the Warsaw ghetto – has been staged. The outstanding work will have its Polish premiere next year.

The classical music festival in Bregenz on Lake Constance is organized with two aims. The festival presents spectacular productions of famous operas on its stage on the water. These are attended by tens of thousands of listeners from Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and England. It also, ambitiously, highlights works by forgotten composers.

This two-pronged approach is the brainchild of the English director David Pountney, who has been the artistic director of the Bregenzer Festspiele for nine years. He decided to revive the tradition of the festival, the first edition of which took place in 1946, on the stage built on the lake. He already has staged "Il Travatore," "Aida," "Andrea Chenier," and this year, "The Magic Flute." He provides light, witty, and cleverly high-tech productions that are open to innovative and quirky ideas.

The performances on the water always start in the evening as darkness slowly settles on the lake. Festival organizers use a sound system, but the productions are performed by very talented singers who are able to project in the unusual setting. Every evening, close to seven thousand spectators gather at the floating amphitheater under the night sky.

Promoter of Poles

Pountney is committed to discovering and staging unknown repertoire. Such works are presented on the stage of the modern Festspielhaus. Thanks to the Englishman and his distinguished director in Bregenz, Karol Szymanowski's "King Roger" was performed and Mieczyslaw Weinberg's "The Passenger" was premiered at the festival. Both operas were organized in cooperation with the Teatr Wielki – Polish National Opera-- and thus also were shown in Poland.

This year, Pountney has prepared a real bombshell – the world premiere of the opera "The Merchant of Venice" by Andrzej Czajkowski, a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto, who after the war was internationally known as an exquisite virtuoso pianist. The first performance of the work took place on July 18th and was reprised on Sunday, July 21st. Plucked from the obscurity in which it had languished for the 31 years following Czajkowski's death (he worked on the score until the end of his life), "The Merchant of Venice" has proven to be an outstanding work, worthy of the best stages in the world. Its vocal parts offer an alluring target for performers.

"Czajkowski, like Weinberg, was lost in a black hole of oblivion after his death. Nobody was interested in his opera, which he considered his life's great work. The score proves the brilliance and intelligence of its creator," said David Pountney, who entrusted the direction of "Merchant" to his colleague Keith Warner. This past February, Warner staged a new production of Krzysztof Penderecki's "The Devils of Loudun" in Copenhagen.



Link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UE75RejxZM>

After his “resurrection” of Weinberg, Pountney became interested in Czajkowski on the advice of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute and musicologist Anastasia Belina-Johnson, whose book about the Polish composer was released in German during the festival, while an English version will be released in the UK this November. “I was looking for a theme for the next festival. It was not I who found Czajkowski, but rather he who found me,” says the director of the Bregenzer Festspiele.

This production of “Merchant of Venice” was carried out in cooperation with the National Opera in Warsaw and will be part of their 2014/15 season. The opera also will be released on DVD.

A series of symposia and concerts were organized in Bregenz in cooperation with the Adam Mickiewicz Institute. Visitors were able to hear other works by Czajkowski, including his “Piano Concerto Opus 4” and “Seven Sonnets of Shakespeare.”

Opera of Male Love

Czajkowski came from an assimilated Jewish family in Warsaw’s Muranow neighborhood. His real name was Robert Andrzej Krauthammer, after his father, who was a German Jew. Andrzej assumed the name Czajkowski for protection during WWII. When he was seven years old, his grandmother, Celina Rappaport-Sandler, smuggled him out of the ghetto, having found a family who would shelter him. Andrzej spent many months hidden in a closet longing for his mother, who was murdered in Treblinka. Regret about his escape from the ghetto plagued Andrzej for the rest of his life. Hanna Krall writes about this history in her report “Hamlet,” from the collection “Proofs of Existence.”

Czajkowski started playing the piano as a ten year old, after the war. He proved an extraordinary talent, and later would study at the elite Paris Conservatoire. He had a phenomenal memory and was able to play scores from memory after a single reading. Once, when touring in New Zealand, he undertook a project of playing 22 Mozart piano concertos. He met his goal, memorizing one piece a day. In the 50s, after a successful appearance at the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels, Czajkowski emigrated from Poland to Paris. By 1957, he had made his debut in New York, where he caught the attention of the famous impresario Sol Hurok. It was Hurok who came up with the pseudonym André Tchaikowsky.

Czajkowski was a man of contradictions. A rebellious individualist who delighted in controversial interpretations, he also often was gripped by stage fright. “He had a magnetism of a real artist,” writes Hanna Krall. He broke off friendships, driving his friends to nervous breakdowns and playing with their feelings, never able to preserve relationships. Charming, seductive, and extremely witty, Czajkowski also often fell into paralyzing depressions. When asked by Artur Rubenstein why, despite his great talent, he did not have a real career, Czajkowski answered, “Because I do not care about it.”

Czajkowski's letters to his friend Halina Sander show that his true passion was composing. He wrote: "It consumes me like the greatest love." At the age of 15, he was admitted to the Polish Composers' Union. He then experienced his first romance – with Zygmunt Mycielski. He broke the man's heart, and painfully felt the rejection. Czajkowski did not fully accept his homosexuality, though he made no secret of it. With dreams of starting a family and having a son, Czajkowski met with a psychiatrist in Paris in hopes of changing his sexual orientation (it was the 70s). These attempts at a "cure" obviously failed.

It is probably the themes of homosexuality (not directly addressed by Shakespeare) in the love between Antonio and Bassanio in "The Merchant of Venice" that drew Czajkowski to the Shakespearian comedy. The author of "Hamlet" was a lifelong fascination of the composer--so much so that Czajkowski willed his own skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company where it has "played" the skull of Yorick in "Hamlet."

"Czajkowski identified with Antonio, who from the very beginning of the opera sings 'I am so sad, so sad,' for his friend Bassanio plans to commit to a woman," says Pountney. Czajkowski's choice to score the part of Antonio for a countertenor -- a high male voice -- is unusual. He finished the opera on his deathbed, in the Oxford hospital where he eventually lost his battle with cancer. He was 47.

"The Merchant of Venice" also follows a different thread regarding the vengeful and cruel Jew, Shylock, who is subject of Christians' contempt. This openly anti-Semitic element, which in Shakespeare's time certainly would not have aroused indignation, is less prominent in Czajkowski, a survivor of the Holocaust. Shakespeare's Shylock is a decidedly negative character, who in the end is ridiculed. In Czajkowski's hands, he becomes a tragic, miserable figure (preserved in the monologue "has not a Jew hands, organs, feelings, passions?"). In the third act, the orchestra "laughs" at Shylock's outwitting.

SA* Militia under the Merchant's House

Director Keith Warner closely follows the designs of the composer. He stresses the erotic nature of the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. At the same time he sharpens, perhaps too much, the issue of the persecution of Shylock. To show the constancy of anti-Semitism, he creates a scene in which inquisitors with pointy hoods and SA-men with torches sneak into Shylock's home. It proves to be too literal.

Warner succeeds, however, in his decision to transfer the action from Renaissance Venice to England in the time of Edward VII. Moving steel walls imitating safe deposit boxes and armored cabinets in the first act depict a world increasingly driven by capitalism and the dictates of the stock exchange – and the twilight of the old world. In this world of money, power, and men, Jews are not given an equal hand, but rather are borrowed from on collateral. Czajkowski evokes this grim world in the entrances of the trumpets and trombones, particularly in the scene where Shylock appears. In contrast, the second act is quite funny. His hero here is the wise Portia, Bassanio's fiancée. This is the only part of the opera composed with traditional tonality, which emphasizes the mood of harmony and good.

* Sturm Abteilung (Storm Section -or- Storm Troopers) - A private Nazi army

“The Merchant of Venice” is arguably the greatest work of Czakowski, whose outstanding creativity was perhaps too extensive. Writing for a strongly developed symphony orchestra, he was a master of operatic counterpoint and sensitive to orchestral color. In this opera, the orchestra, on the one hand, supports and highlights the vocal lines; while on the other – as in the work of Alban Berg – it leads an intense, atonal life of its own.

All of the intricacies of the score are clearly brought out by Erik Nielsen, conducting the Vienna Symphony Orchestra and two choirs – mixed and boys. The most interesting voice was that of baritone Adrian Eröd as Shylock. The entire cast, down to the smallest role, sang at the very highest level, including Christopher Ainslie (Antonio), Charles Workman (Bassanio), and the Polish Magdalena Anna Hofmann as Portia.

“The Merchant of Venice,” although its libretto is in English, is the second Polish opera (after Szymanowski’s “King Roger”) to directly address a homosexual relationship linking its heroes.

Translation: Alena Aniskiewicz