

MUSIC REVIEW

'Merchant of Venice' and 'The Magic Flute' at Bregenz Festival



Karl Forster/Bregenz Festspiele

"The Merchant of Venice" by Andre Tchaikowsky, who died in 1982, is receiving its world premiere under the direction of Keith Warner at the Bregenz Festival in Austria.

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BREGENZ, Austria — "The Merchant of Venice," an opera written more than 30 years ago by the composer Andre Tchaikowsky, received its belated world premiere at the Bregenz Festival this month. Remarkably, it's the second time in three years that the summer festival has unveiled a work never staged in the composer's lifetime.

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The earlier production was of "The Passenger" by Mieczyslaw Weinberg; both proved to be fascinating experiences. Like Weinberg, Tchaikowsky (who was born Robert Andrzej Krauthammer) was of Polish-Jewish origin but made his career elsewhere. Where Weinberg went to Russia and became a protégé of Shostakovich, Tchaikowsky, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, settled in Britain, where recognition as a pianist led to a contract with RCA Victor. His chief priority was composition, although his work list is small. He had discussions with the English National Opera about his only opera, "The Merchant of Venice," but after his death from cancer in 1982 at age 46, the opera languished until now.

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Anja Kohler/Bregenzer Festspiele  
Rainer Trost as Tamino in "The Magic Flute" on the festival's stage over Lake Constance.

Its music, complex and impressively crafted, is basically atonal, yet it can accommodate late-Romantic expressiveness in a way that recalls Alban Berg. It also has recourse to other idioms when they can serve the drama. For instance, just before the introduction of Shylock — a character Tchaikovsky must have identified with — brooding woodwinds articulate a lugubrious, vaguely Oriental theme surely meant to signify his Jewishness. Further listening would reveal other details of characterization in the densely packed but rather

introverted score.

Still, the opera shows a lack of theatrical savoir faire attributable, no doubt, to Tchaikovsky's inexperience. After cogently setting up the central plot in which Antonio, serving as surety for Shylock's loan to Bassanio, promises his pound of flesh, the drama meanders as the setting shifts from Venice to Belmont, and other characters — Shylock's daughter Jessica, Bassanio's beloved Portia, the latter's suitors and others — are introduced.

Yet the scene also brings engaging musical details, like fanfares drawn from Beethoven and (the other) Tchaikovsky, Renaissance dance rhythms and even Wagner's Ring leitmotiv, heard when Portia gives Bassanio a ring. Things get back on track at once following the revelation of Antonio's catastrophic shipping losses. The courtroom scene is gripping, and the epilogue supplies a pleasant, if unduly long, afterglow.

Also problematic is John O'Brien's libretto, which preserves much of Shakespeare's original language. Its fidelity may be a boon to those who know the play inside out, but otherwise the text — which was sung in English with German titles — was difficult to follow. What can audiences make of lines like Shylock's "take no doit of usance for my moneys" when sung at them?

Keith Warner's thoughtful staging, with sets and costumes by Ashley Martin-Davis, doesn't depict Venice in the detail Tchaikovsky seems to have contemplated. But it brings a bracing realism to the scenes dealing with the loan, especially the trial, while taking a whimsical, even surrealistic approach to the scenes in Belmont.

The playing by the Vienna Symphony, attentively balanced by the conductor Erik Nelson, went far in revealing the merits of the music, and the singers upheld their responsibilities with distinction. Casting Antonio as a countertenor was apparently meant to emphasize his emotional vulnerability — Mr. Warner sets the opening scene, in which Antonio complains of his sadness, in a psychiatrist's office. Christopher Ainslie's voice was too small for the role, but one grew accustomed to it. The tenor Charles Workman was in excellent form as Bassanio, painfully aware of Antonio's plight.

Adrian Eröd, a baritone, kept emotion in check as Shylock, irrespective of whether developments favored him or not, yet you felt the injustices the character suffers.

"The Merchant of Venice" is a co-production of Warsaw's Adam Mickiewicz Institute and Teatr Wielki.

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