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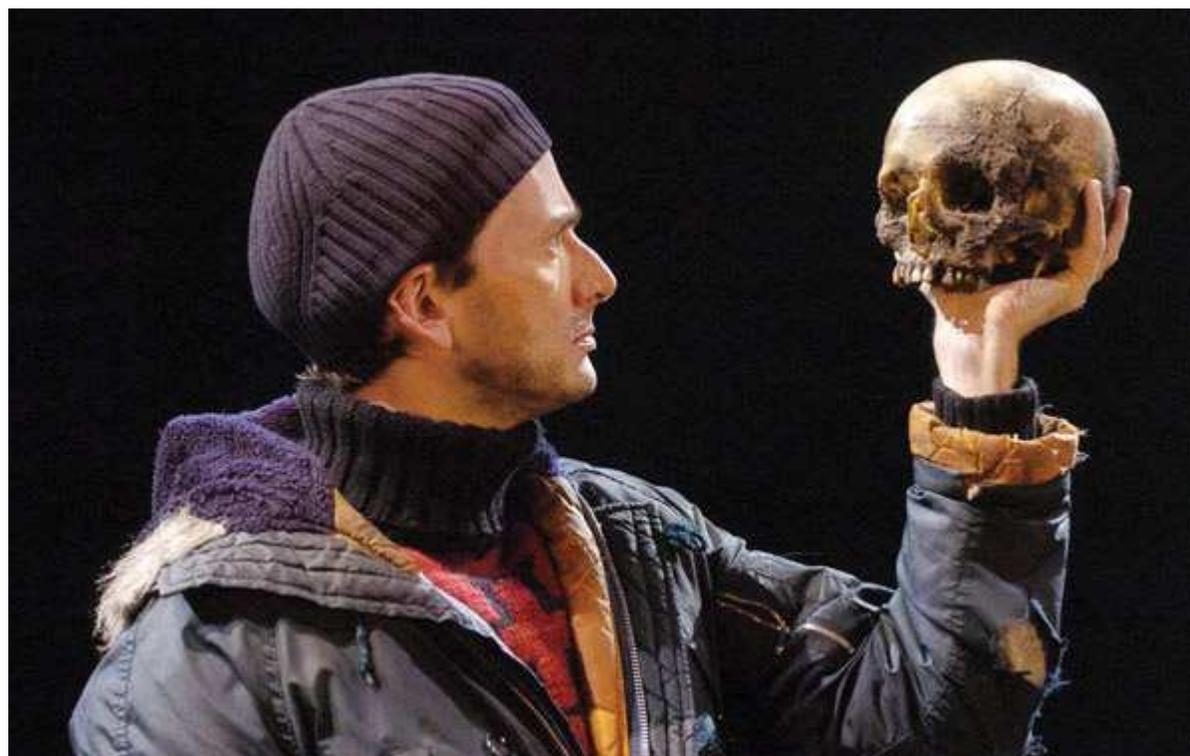
# OPERA NEWS

Features

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## Tragic Dimension

This summer, the Bregenz Festival will offer the world premiere of André Tchaikowsky's *Merchant of Venice*, more than twenty-five years after the composer's death. A. J. GOLDMANN reports.



Actor David Tennant with composer Tchaikowsky's skull in *Hamlet* at the Novello Theatre, 2008  
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When the Austrian city of Bregenz, the capital of Vorarlberg, decided to host a music festival in 1946, it did so without a single theater at its disposal, staging Mozart's early opera *Bastien und Bastienne* on two barges that were moored on Lake Constance: one carried the scenery and singers, the other the orchestra. Initially, the solution was considered provisional. However, in time, opera on the lake became the defining feature of the festival. Nowadays, the Seebühne, or Floating Stage (an upgrade from the original two barges that plays to audiences as large as 6,800), presents blockbuster productions of popular repertoire that attract hundreds of thousands of visitors each season.

But Bregenz also presents a wide array of musical and

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theatrical programming on four other stages that have been built in the past half-century, offering a total of about 100 performances a year. The Festspielhaus, a considerably smaller venue, is where the opulent lakeside theatrics find their counterpoint in often-innovative productions of works that have seldom been seen and heard. This year, festival artistic director David Pountney has scheduled the world premiere of André Tchaikowsky's *Merchant of Venice*. It opens at Bregenz on July 18.

During his decade-long tenure, Pountney, a renowned British director, has presented rare works by Kurt Weill and new operas by Harrison Birtwistle and Judith Weir alongside blockbuster productions of *Trovatore*, *Aida*, *Tosca* (featured memorably in the 2007 James Bond film *Quantum of Solace*) and, most recently, *Andrea Chénier*. But perhaps the most recognizable trait of Pountney's tenure has been his advocacy of little-known operas by Polish composers. In the past few seasons, Karol Szymanowski's *King Roger* and the first fully staged production of Mieczyslaw Weinberg's *Passenger* have been shown here to great acclaim. For his valedictory year with the festival, Pountney has turned to Tchaikowsky's *Merchant*, another Polish opera, written more than thirty years ago.

Born to a secular Jewish family in Warsaw in 1935 (his real name was Robert Andrzej Krauthammer), Tchaikowsky showed remarkable aptitude for the piano. However, he was scarcely five years old when his family was forced into the Warsaw Ghetto. His grandmother obtained false papers for him, renaming him after her favorite composer, and the pair managed to survive the war in hiding. Afterward, he resumed his musical instruction in Poland, Paris and Brussels, winning prizes in prestigious piano competitions during the 1950s. He spent the last two decades of his life in London, where he divided his time between performing and composing. He also learned to speak and write impeccable English and developed a fondness for Shakespeare. In fact, his obsession with the Bard was so extreme that he achieved a measure of posthumous fame (or infamy) by donating his skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company to be used in productions of *Hamlet*.

There have been a couple of other operatic settings of *Merchant of Venice*, including one in English by Adrian Beecham, all of them relatively obscure. "It's not as if there are so many operas written with an English Shakespearean text to them," explains Pountney. "I think *The Merchant of Venice* is a wonderful operatic subject, because essentially the content of the play inhabits two very different worlds. There's the world of Venice, which in Shakespeare's time was a business center, not the sort of picturesque tourist destination we think of now. It was a place of money and business and material values. And this rather unpleasant and all-male world is contrasted by the world inhabited by Portia — Belmont — which is a female world of music and love and beauty. It makes a very good operatic subject, because it requires two different kinds of music to characterize these two worlds, and that is something that Tchaikowsky has achieved quite brilliantly."



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 Warner  
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Tchaikowsky, who was gay, suffered all his life from a depression that was perhaps brought on by his harrowing childhood experiences. "When I think of André Tchaikowsky, I think of a persona rather than just a composer," explains Pavel Potoroczyn, director of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute in Warsaw, a government-sponsored organization to promote Polish language and culture abroad, which is one of the Bregenz production's partner institutions. "He's so much more than a musician or a genius pianist. I think he personifies the trauma of the twentieth century. And the sensitive listener can hear it in his music — how he reflects not only his personal experience being Jewish and gay and a highly complicated personality, but also witnessing the most horrifying events of the twentieth century."

Tchaikowsky is best remembered as an elegant pianist who recorded works by Bach, Mozart and Chopin for RCA and EMI in the late 1950s and '60s. Though he was an immensely talented and individual musician, his temperamental behavior prevented him from ever becoming a Clifford Curzon or Van Cliburn. A man of odd personal habits and morbid wit, he liked to scandalize society ladies at receptions by introducing himself as a homosexual Jewish communist; on one occasion, he claimed to have poisoned a harpist to get out of having to play the Ravel piano concerto. When he died of colon cancer at the age of forty-six, he left behind a small body of original compositions that have rarely been performed.

"He was a very unstable personality," says Pountney, "and not really able to sustain an international round of a concert pianist, and he longed to compose. He wrote some small pieces and a piano concerto, which was premiered by Radu Lupu. And then, of all things, he sat down to compose an entire opera based on a rather complex Shakespeare play, which is a rather ambitious thing to do." Pountney has programmed the concerto and selected chamber works for a Tchaikowsky symposium that will be held during the opening weekend of the festival.

For the work of a first-time opera composer, *The Merchant of Venice* shows great confidence and ambition. Working from a libretto adaptation by John O'Brien, the composer produced an opera in three acts with an epilogue, scored for a large orchestra that features a piano, a harpsichord and a stage band. The composer precisely notated the effects he wanted, such as knocks at the door, keys turning in locks, laughter and different types of whistling. Pountney describes the music as "polytonal, existing in a world somewhere between Britten and Berg."

It may seem curious that a Jewish composer writing in the late twentieth century should choose *The Merchant of Venice*, with its infamous depiction of Shylock, the Jewish money-lender, as his theme. "That this play, with all its problematic associations with anti-Semitism, should be written by a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto is peculiarly piquant," Pountney says, adding that Tchaikowsky's characterization of Shylock is ultimately sympathetic. "I think that's something he brings out very clearly in the music. Shylock is interesting because he's a character who acquires a tragic dimension through the way in which he's treated in the trial scene. Portia becomes increasingly ruthless and intolerant, and this is what causes Shylock to shift from being a villain to a tragic victim, even if he's a tragic victim of his own making. But then again, that very often happens to tragic figures, like King Lear or Macbeth."

But while Tchaikowsky and Shylock share a religion, Pountney suggests that the composer aligns himself more closely with Shylock's nemesis Antonio and plays up the homoerotic overtones of his friendship with Bassanio, Portia's suitor. "Antonio's clearly in love with Bassanio, which is not explicit in Shakespeare, but quite implied. I think this is, to some extent, a self-portrait of André himself. The play starts with Antonio being in an inexplicable depression. At the end of the play, when everyone is neatly paired off, there are two people left alone — Antonio and Shylock. So in a way, these two opponents render themselves lonely and isolated and ungratified at the end of the piece."

For the production, Pountney has enlisted the talents of his compatriot, director Keith Warner. "I'm obviously aware of our responsibility" says Pountney, "in the sense that this is a world premiere of a piece that's never been done before, and if we make a mess of it, it will never be done again, probably." Warner is perhaps best known for his *Ring* cycle at the Royal Opera House, though his resumé also includes well-received productions of Shakespeare. "I wanted someone who I know is able to deliver a narrative production," says Pountney, "because I think when you're dealing with a new piece, it's not the place to look for some kind of

extravagant interpretation. And also someone who has a great affinity with Shakespeare and the English theatrical tradition."

That *Merchant of Venice* should be performed now seems appropriate for Pountney. Indeed, in terms of his career trajectory, things seem to be coming full circle in his final season at Bregenz. Pountney relates that he was working at English National Opera in 1981 when Tchaikovsky turned up one day with a piano reduction of the score. "André came and performed at least one act to a small committee of people. So I actually heard it over twenty years ago. And unfortunately, our general director, Lord Harewood, then decided that we did not have space to program that work at that time. And I know that André was incredibly disappointed by that, because he wrote about all this in his diaries, which have now come to light. Being a sort of manic-depressive character, he had these tremendous highs and lows, and he was terribly cut down by being rejected. Then, of course, everyone forgot about it, because he died very shortly afterwards," he explains. For nearly three decades, it seemed the score was destined for eternal oblivion, until two independent conversations, with the Adam Mickiewicz Institute and with a Russian musicologist, reminded him of the opera's existence, which set the wheels for the premiere in motion. "So now, I'm making a few amends."

Ten days before his death, on June 26, 1982, Tchaikovsky wrote in his diary, "I hope that I have time at least to write what it is I have in my head.... When I discovered how things stand, I immediately started to orchestrate the last act of the opera while I was still in hospital, and I'm only a few pages short now. I'd still like to do something so I feel that I haven't wasted my life." It's taken a while, but with the Bregenz production, it seems a dying wish has finally been fulfilled. As Pountney says, "This is a remarkable chance to discover a masterpiece that is waiting to be heard." □

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