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The Two Sides of Andrzej Czajkowski

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Andrzej Czajkowski's *The Merchant of Venice* is a wonderful piece of music, worthy of exposure on the best stages in the world.

Why did Czajkowski select this work of his beloved Shakespeare? (Beloved to the extent that the composer bequeathed his own skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company – to serve as a prop in Hamlet.) The decision to adapt a work with such anti-Semitic overtones is especially puzzling to those who know the story of Czajkowski's life, that he was a survivor of the Holocaust. Well, in this play, nothing is explicit. As David Pountney, head of the Bregener Festspiele, notes, the main theme of the work is multi-dimensional interpersonal relations. Czajkowski, along with his librettist John O'Brien, emphasizes certain aspects of Shakespeare's work. O'Brien notes that from the beginning Czajkowski saw the role of Antonio scored for a countertenor and Shylock's part accompanied by trombone and tuba.

Together these two characters compose an alter ego for Czajkowski. There is an obvious connection with Shylock, a Jew who eventually becomes a victim (despite the persistence of anti-Semitic stereotypes in Shakespeare, the character delivers a harrowing monologue on persecution, asserting that he is the same as other men). On the other hand, we have Antonio, the ...homosexual who is prone to depression. In this version, Antonio does everything for his friend Bassanio, simply because he loves him. All in all, Czajkowski likely felt closer to Antonio than to Shylock. He survived the war and had never been a religious Jew (even before the war, his family was completely assimilated). It was, rather, problems of sexuality that followed him through life.

However, more important than Czajkowski's personal life is his music. The world was introduced to him, and knew him for many years, primarily as a talented pianist – the winner of the Chopin Competition and the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels. In Brussels, Arthur Rubinstein anointed Czajkowski as his successor (a designation the young, rebellious musician soon cast off). Though fewer people knew him as a composer, writing music was his greatest passion since childhood. Czajkowski considered himself a much better composer than a pianist – and there are indications that he was correct. Especially now, as we are introduced to his *Merchant of Venice* live.

In Poland his compositions for chamber ensembles and piano were tirelessly promoted by Maciej Grzybowski, an admirer of his work who continues to advocate for broader exposure of the *Merchant of Venice*. Shortly before his death, Czajkowski presented fragments of piano excerpts from the opera at the English National Opera. Unfortunately, at the time he was denied the opportunity to stage the work, so *Merchant of Venice* has waited until today. Additionally, in 1981 the opera's style – with audible echoes of Berg, Britten, and even Hindemith – may have seemed too traditional for the modern stage. Today, however, it is judged simply by its quality. And its quality is outstanding.

While much of Czajkowski's chamber music is inherently bleak, with a quality of something reduced to ashes, in *Merchant of Venice*, we hear a great deal more variation in atmosphere. Acts I and III are of course quite gloomy, but the second act – in which Portia chooses a husband – is satirical. It features no shortage of musical citations; referencing Beethoven's *Leonora Overture No. 3* and... *Symphony No. 4* by Andrzej's namesake, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, whose music he sincerely hated and never played. The epilogue that follows Act III – though a little wordy – features exceptionally beautiful, lyrical, and dreamlike music.

This production, which also will be staged in Warsaw during the 2014/2015 season, is directed by Keith Warner (Pountney stressed that it was decided immediately that because of the language of the libretto, the director must be English). His production, moved to Edwardian times (a decision Pountney calls "a good idea, because each of them, including Shylock, are here respected businessmen"), has its pros and cons. It is visually engaging and has a number of interesting ideas, though there are moments of irritatingly obvious truths (especially related to the persecution of Shylock). The masqueraders are given uniquely evocative costumes, providing a sense of Venetian carnival, though this at times obscures the move to a twentieth century setting. The production is supported by a great cast that should be brought to Warsaw in its entirety. Perhaps the weakest, in that he quite literally had the slightest voice, was Christopher Ainslie's Antonio (I do not quite know a countertenor who could develop such a forceful part, especially over such dense orchestration. Paul Esswood used to be one, and was cast by Penderecki as *Death in Paradise Lost*). The rest of the cast is sensational, especially Charles Workman (Bassanio), Adrian Clarke (Salerio), Jason Bridges (Lorenzo), the fantastic Adrian Eröd, and all three of the female leads: Jessica (Kathryn Lewka), Portia (Magdalena Anna Hofmann), and Nerissa (Verena Gunz). Conductor Erik Nielsen wades through the dense score with success, bringing out all of its nuances.

The Symposium on Czajkowski is already underway. Today, the Meccorre String Quartet will play Czajkowski's *Quartet No. 2* and Lutoslawski's *Quartet*. Tomorrow, Maciej Grzybowski and the Vienna Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Paul Daniel will perform Czajkowski's *Piano Concerto*, the same piece he played five years ago at the festival Chopin and His Europe.

Translation: Alena Aniskiewicz