

DWUTYGODNIK

# ruch muzyczny

Sensual Czajkowski, Literal Warner

After the Premiere of the Merchant of Venice in Bregenz

In Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (1596-1598), music appears in the third act. There, Bassanio faces three caskets, in whose magic lie the fate of his beloved Portia. To win her hand, he must open the chest in which her father has enclosed her portrait. (To come to Belmont, Bassanio asks his friend Antonio for financial help. Borrowing money from Shylock, a Jew, he signs a notarized pledge: to repay the loan with money or a pound of flesh.) Portia, indifferent to the courting of the



CHRISTOPHER AINSLIE (Antonio), Photo: Karl Forster

Venetian, announces that Bassanio's choice will be accompanied by music: either a swan song to mark his error, or a fanfare as though to announce a new ruler, or it will be "as are those dulcet sounds in the break of day/That creep into the dreaming bridegroom's ear,/And summon him to marriage." She then starts to sing: "Tell me where is fancy bred,/Or in the heart, or in the head?..." ("How begot, how nourished?/Reply, reply./It is engender'd in the eyes"), ending with the indifferent phrase "ding, dong, bell," which is repeated by all those present (to which the Polish translator Stanislaw Baranczak adds another tone: "Let him when the bell tolls:/Din-din-don,/funeral bell"). In the unfinished opera (1968-1982) by Andrzej Czajkowski – with a libretto by John O'Brien – this scene comes in the second, central act, which unfolds exclusively in Belmont. Several musicians come to instruments (including a harpsichord) arranged to the right of the proscenium. They are joined by a singer dressed in a white suit and a bright wig (Marlene Dietrich?), who makes her way to an old-fashioned microphone. Czajkowski picks up Portia's words of love (in Warner's production, a boy becomes the singing girl), stylizing the song as baroque. It works quite nicely. Gathered in a green garden-maze, observers look on as Bassanio (Charles Workman, tenor; Eric in the Warsaw production of *The Flying Dutchman*, dir. Trelinski)

approaches the only vault still unopened – a vault the color of lead. The others have been opened – one with dynamite and the other with a pistol – by the Prince of Morocco (black dancer Elliot Lebogang Mohlamme, styled like a pirate of the Caribbean) and the Prince of Aragon (actor Julius Kubiak, in a blue and gold dress uniform), in a scene without words and accompanied by slapstick music and clumsily choreographed sequences based in folk theatre. One suitor finds a mirror; the other, a human skull.

Moments before, Nerissa (Verena Gunz, mezzo-soprano; Cherubion in Warner's Warsaw production of *The Marriage of Figaro*) wrote down a few phrases on the machine and placed them in each of the three huge bank vaults. There is no competition, no risk, mystery, or poetry. There is no stress. Portia (Magdalena Anna Hofmann, soprano), at least for a moment, must get out of her lounge chair, to say hello to her lover, dance with him...and throw him onto the lounge. Shakespeare's Belmont (designed by Andrea Palladio, and which Noemi Magri described as Villa Foscari in Mira) looks quite like Venice's Lido in the first half of the century, and perhaps even evokes echoes of the beach scenes from Mann/Visconti's *Death in Venice* (1912, 1971).

This is actually the only Venetian accent in the staging. And it probably is not enough. In general, Keith Warner's production lacks for metaphor and poetic notes. It is too literal. I still remember the images of Britten's *Death in Venice*, which Warner staged in 2005 at the Oper Frankfurt, with production design by Boris Kudlicka. It was tasteful and symbolic: a square frame moved silently on the stage, forming settings (once a Venetian street, other times a hotel room and a hairdressers) or tunnels of the subconscious, at the end of which Aschenbach always saw Tadzio; a slightly raised wooden floor, upon which a piano repeatedly appeared and accompanied Aschenbach with wistful melodies; several dozen horizontal cyclorama on which upside down panorama of Venice flowed as if towards the sea.

Andrzej Czajkowski's music begs for lightness, refinement, and counter-punch. It is a music between explosion and silence, in constant motion, always changing; inconsolable, flashing phrases wander from instrument to instrument, as though passed along in a ballerina's dance. The instrumentation, moreover, often involves treating instrumental sections or soloists selectively – including cello, violin, flute, piccolo, and the tuba and trombone assigned to Shylock. Somewhere between Berg, Shostakovich, and Britten, the music also bears the mark of individualism that characterizes every piece by Czajkowski. It is remarkable music.

On stage in Bregenz, even before the first notes of music, audiences see three lit white horizons (at the back and the sides behind the scenes), as well as two symmetrical solid walls decorated in shades of gray, the fronts of which resemble bank vaults. As the lights dim and the first sounds of music are heard, there appears a couch on which Antonio (Christopher Ainslie, countertenor) is seated. There also appears a chair, seated on which is a psychoanalyst bearing a strong resemblance to Freud (with a beard and a cigar). Three additional safes are brought on stage: in one is Bassanio, Shylock (Adrian Eröde, baritone) is in another – they represent the remorse from which Antonio is trying to heal.

This image comes back in the final epilogue. In Belmont again – this time without the garden-maze – a big, bright moon (in accordance with Lorenzo's lines: "how fondly the moon/sheathed with silver covers the hillside") rises behind three safes stacked like giant suitcases; from one grows a silver tree, in the middle there appears a fire, and the third brings water. It is all terribly kitschy, like

a postcard. First there is a love duet between Lorenzo (Jason Bridges, tenor) and Jessica (Kathryn Lewka, soprano), who he has stolen and baptized. Portia and Nerissa then discuss their husbands – Bassanio and Gratiano – who have lost their wedding bands, the symbol of fidelity and love. This is all taken from the fifth act of Shakespearian comedy. Finally, Antonio returns, against rich and revived, yet older, more mature, and still sad. He is bitter. He stares at Bassanio. He then sits down next to his doctor. They smoke. The music recedes, the lights dim, and the curtain falls.

The epilogue seems unnecessary, especially as directed. The preceding third act (played after an intermission) is a great culmination of the whole. The first scene is on the street. Two forms create a sort of cone (like the corner of the walls surrounding the ghetto, for example), at which Salerio (Adrian Clarke, bass-baritone) and Solanio (Norman Patzke, bass-baritone) are disguised as, respectively, a journalist and a photographer. Poised to sniff out Venetian affairs and happenings, they are bullied by Shylock, who is grieving the abduction of his daughter. Next is the court session at the Doge's (Richard Angas, bass) – a small gray room that resembles the inside of an interview room more than a Venetian palace.

Then the final act – the most powerful on stage and the most beautiful in the score. Portia, disguised as a lawyer, offers a formal justification for the judgment against Shylock. The temperature of the music increases. The Jew is defenseless. He rises from the table as the surrounding mob throws sheets at him. They then pursue him, accusingly reaching for him and shouting “Jew! Jew!” Shylock moves to the proscenium, and there remains hidden under a white sheet as though dead (this lasts almost until the end of the show, and better for forget what Warner does with him in the epilogue...). The curtain falls, as the change of scenery is prepared behind it. We are left only with this piece of despised human trash. Here Czajkowski's instrumental music reaches, in a few minutes, heights similar to those of the adagio in Berg's *Wozzeck*.

“There is no nature so hard, heartless,/indomitable to her for a while/They could not soften the musical harmonies” – says Lorenzo in the final scene of *The Merchant of Venice*. Indeed, to this day we cannot understand how the nation that gave us Bach, Beethoven, and Schubert perpetrated such crimes in the middle of the last century. I still remember the comments of Pascal Quignard to the memoirs of Simon Laks, starting with a prosecution of music for participation in the Holocaust. In the scene after Jessica's escape in the first act, where the carnival of Shakespeare's crowd recalls a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan, with children dressed as “jews” hurling cake at Shylock and taking gold picture frames from his home, the audience in Bregenz is plunged into silence. Such an image in Austria is still able to make an impression. It is a pity it is not enough. After all, a Polish Jew and a homosexual, born in 1935 as Robert Andrzej Krauthammer, rescued by his grandmother from the ghetto in 1942 and rechristened Andrzej Czajkowski (his mother died shortly thereafter in Treblinka), the composer's biography led him to write his only opera based on Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. It is a bittersweet comedy about hatred of the Other, in which no one is left unsullied. Nor is anyone entirely happy. The psychoanalytic couch, even in Austria, looks like a cheap skeleton key, not a confession. (Translation: Alena Aniskiewicz)

**Andrzej Czajkowski, *The Merchant of Venice*. Musical Director: Erik Nielsen; Directed by Keith Warner; Set Design: Ashley Martin-Davis; Lights: Davy Cunningham. World premiere at the Festspielhaus in Bregenz (co-production of Bregenzer Festspiele, Teatr Wielki – National Opera, Adam Mickiewicz Institute), July 18, 2013.**