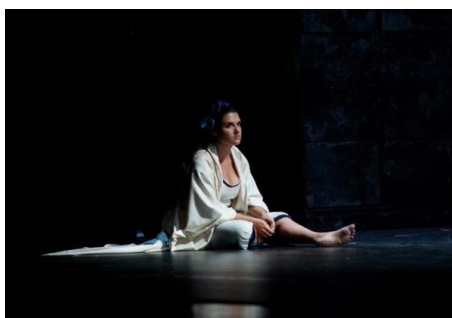


An Extraordinary Opera



"Merchant of Venice" - Court Scene,
First from left Adrian Eröd (Shylock)

Photos: Bregenz Festival/Karl Forster



"Merchant of Venice"



"Merchant of Venice"

"Merchant of Venice" by Andrzej Czajkowski is a unique discovery – says Jacek Marczyński from Bregenz

After more than 30 years, the work finally has seen its premier. And it seems the wait may have been worth it, as Bregenz is one of the most important festivals in Europe. At the festival, every production of "Merchant of Venice" was watched intensely by almost 2000 spectators, to which many of whom the name Andrzej Czajkowski – who died in 1982 – means very little.

There is no doubt that "Merchant of Venice" is an unusual opera. In the music one can feel the breath of the twentieth century masters: Berg, Britten, Stravinsky, and Shostakovich. But above all, the individuality of Andrzej Czajkowski presides -- expressed in his innovative treatment of traditional arias and duets, his wealth of ideas, and remarkable instrumentation. To appreciate his talent, one only need listen to how he vividly evokes two distinct worlds with his music: Venice – a city of business and money, and Belmont – the land of love, kindness, and generosity. "Merchant of Venice" however brings with it some lingering questions. Did Czajkowski choose to adapt the story because of his love of Shakespeare, whose sonnets he could recite by heart? Did the composer -- a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto, who felt different throughout his adult life because of his origin, sexual orientation, and aversion of all social conventions -- see a bit of himself in the titular hero?

"Merchant of Venice" is rarely staged, for in this age of political correctness many question how to portray Shylock – a Jewish moneylender, overwhelmed by desire for revenge. Having borrowed money from Shylock to help his friend Bassanio, the noble Antonio promises a pound of his own flesh if the debt is not repaid on time. When Antonio's venture fails, Shylock demands fulfillment of the contract, looking to take revenge on all – including Antonio, who always despised him.

The opera "Merchant of Venice" retains the plot of its Shakespearian source, but is otherwise quite different from the original. Czajkowski subdues the religious background of the conflict and importantly, defends Shylock. His dramatic monologue explaining his motives has been moved to the final scene in the court, where he is seeking his rights. Here the viewer is aware that he is a man who has long been cast aside by others. In Shakespeare, the ploy that protects Antonio from cruel punishment occurs suddenly and makes for a happy ending. The opera, however, makes us realize that the majority is always right, and that those who are different always lose.

The composer's vision is brought to life by Keith Warner, the director of this recent production. He moved the action to the 1920s, an era of dynamic and absolute capitalism. His representatives are Shylock and Antonio, though their characters are very different. The latter seeks help on Dr. Freud's couch, for he was involved in a relationship with Bassanio, who in turn is madly in love with Portia.

Nazism is already lurking in the background as Shylock experiences the first signs of hatred of the Jews. In this context, when Shylock's daughter Jessica runs away with the Christian Lorenzo, it is not merely, as in Shakespeare's play, for love. She also is looking to escape into a safer world. Keith Warner in general does not avoid literalism and naturalism, as is evident in this production. But Czajkowski also wanted poetry. After the magnificent, thrilling orchestral interlude depicting the fall of Shylock, the composer added an extended epilogue, in which each pair of lovers sings of happiness. The music unfolds gently and ethereally, but there remains a tension, because the director seems unsure of what to do with it.

The real winners of this production in Bregenz are Czajkowski and those who have believed in him. American conductor Erik Nielsen directs the Vienna Symphony and singers flawlessly. Austrian baritone Adrian Eröd gives a poignant performance creating the role of Shylock. Magdalena Anna Hofmann is wonderful as Portia, and tenor Charles Workman (Bassanio) also is superb.

What is next for "Merchant of Venice?" This question has already been raised in the positive reviews from Austria and Germany, though some question whether the world will be interested in the opera by the Polish Czajkowski. The festival in Bregenz often is happy to present unknown works. Two years ago it staged "The Passenger" by Mieczyslaw Weinberg, based on the novel by Zofia Pomysz. This opera waited even longer than "Merchant" for its discovery on the stage; and since Bregenz four productions have premiered, most recently in Mannheim.

Translation: Alena Aniskiewicz