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André Tchaikowsky in Bregenz - updated reviews

10 September 2013

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Sometimes giving birth means a long labour period, but in the case of André Tchaikowsky, the labour period for his only opera, **The Merchant of Venice**, was 31 years!

David Pountney, the Intendant of the Bregenz Festival, put his faith in the work by announcing its posthumous premiere as part of this year's festival. Presented in the Festspielhaus, it is a tremendous foil to Pountney's own production of *The Magic Flute*, which is playing on the Seebühne. The work was given its premiere on 18th July 2013, with subsequent performances on the 21st and 28th July.

As is usual, there was a lot of excitement surrounding this premiere from both an audience and press view. The press and audience acclaim has been remarkable, and selections from the reviews are below. The festival presentation of **The Merchant of Venice** is a co-production with the Teatr Wielki, Warsaw and is produced with the kind support of the Adam Mickiewicz Institut

Conductor: Erik Nielsen

Director: Keith Warner

Sets and Costumes: Ashley Martin-Davis

Lighting: Davy Cunningham

Chorus Master: Lukáš Vasilek

Wiener Symphoniker

Prague Philharmonic Choir

[Bregenz Festival Website](#)

[Information about the orchestration and casting of the opera is here](#)

The Telegraph, London

The legacy of Pountney's own productions inside the Festspielhaus is a happier one, not to mention some of the discoveries he has midwived there. The top of that list is surely this summer's world premiere of *The Merchant of Venice* (5 stars) by Polish-born, British composer-pianist André Tchaikowsky, who laboured for a number of years on his only opera before dying of cancer in Oxford in 1982, aged 46. (Notoriously he bequeathed his skull to the RSC for use in performances of *Hamlet*).

A complex, largely forgotten character, Tchaikowsky is eminently worth the trouble Bregenz has taken with his opera. Born Andrzej Krauthammer in

Stephen Hough in print



Stephen Hough's Piano Sonata No.2 (notturmo luminoso) received its London premiere at the Barbican on 19th January 2013. The work is central to his 2012/13 season recital programming.

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Warsaw and smuggled out of the ghetto by his grandmother under the name of Czajkowski, he survived to enjoy success as a pianist, even becoming a finalist in the 1955 Chopin Competition. He left a modest number of publisher compositions.

At Bregenz, Erik Nielsen's strong yet sensitive baton showed each note and every orchestral colour in this long, three-act score means something. Darkly lyrical and hard to pin down stylistically, the music is marvellously responsive to John O'Brien's libretto and Shakespeare's moods.

Keith Warner's elegant, following production evokes the time of the Dreyfuss Affair, yet cleverly alludes to the skull episode (in the Prince of Morocco's dance), while sensitively suggesting a resemblance between Shylock and the composer himself.

Though Adrian Eröd's powerful Shylock stood out, the rest of the excellent cast – including Christopher Ainslie's Merchant, Charles Workman's Bassanio and Kathryn Leweck's Jessica – helped to make this a restitution to remember.

Financial Times, London

Bregenz, with the support of Poland's Adam Mickiewicz Institute, has thrown every imaginable resource at this exhumation to ensure its success. And the results are striking. Director Keith Warner and designer Ashley Martin-Davis update Shakespeare's tale (adapted for the opera with immense sensitivity by John O'Brien, who was present at Thursday's premiere) to a time that could be the end of the 19th century, bookending it with Antonio on a psychiatrist's couch. Warner's staging treads a fine line between harsh cruelty and levity, with a good mix of clarity and complexity.

That is also a fair description of Tchaikovsky's music, which defies attribution to any one definite style of 20th-century composition. The score is intricate and dark, with moments of both brutality and lyricism, not to mention flashes of acerbic wit. Shakespeare's theme of the tension between mercy and justice fascinated the composer. It is hard to imagine who else could have set this opera with such lack of pathos and so refined a sense of ambivalence.

One of Bregenz's great assets is Erik Nielsen, who conducts with an ideal combination of structured intelligence, sensitivity and wisdom. He gives the piece all the care it needs to work, performing miracles of balance even when Tchaikovsky's vocal lines tangle awkwardly with over-scored orchestration – had he lived to hear rehearsals, the composer may well have made some changes.

Bregenz has assembled an elite cast for the occasion, and all the roles are well sung, from Adrian Eröd's poignant Shylock to Charles Workman's noble Bassanio. Pountney believes that this opera deserves a central place in the 20th-century canon; this production makes a strong case for his claim.

Der Tagesspiegel Berlin, Frederik Hanssen ORF interview

I am completely convinced by the staging. It's absolutely brilliant work that Keith Warner has done here. Above all, he convinced me with setting this work around the turn of the century, which works very well through to the end. [...]

The Festival had the courage to present this opera, but respect and thanks for this are well deserved.

Faustkultur Online, Thomas Rothschild ORF interview

It is hard to believe that this opera has not already found its way into the repertoire. I think it is a congenial setting; musically very interesting [...]. It retains the Shylock plot, which is so well known, but also the comedy of the story.

Abenzeitung, Munich

The Wiener Symphoniker conducted by Erik Nielsen performed the colours and tones of the music brilliantly [...] directed by Keith Warner, it was the court scene, in which Shylock insists that he is entitled to the pound of flesh from Antonio, that was most powerful.

Die Welt, Berlin

Tchaikovsky is a technically very accomplished composer. He has mastered the different musical styles with effortless ease. The quotation from his namesake's Fourth Symphony brought great amusement to the audience. His own musical language is freely atonal, strongly defined by the course of action, but still quite independent of it.

Keith Warner's direction of the 'choosing of the husband' scene in second act is particularly effective and totally reminiscent of situation comedy!

Swiss Radio, Zurich

The ensemble of singers, with no fewer than eight major roles, impressed with a solid performance, as did the conducting of Erik Nielsen. The Wiener Symphoniker played most reliably under his leadership. There was a possible aloofness in the playing in this unknown score, but the same cannot be said for the Shylock of Adrian Eröd, whose haunting characterisation was

captivating.

Deutschlandfunk, Cologne

No doubt: This André Tchaikowsky can compose. [...] There is great music in the court room scene and grotesqueness in the musical quotations during the 'choosing of the husband' scene in the second act. There was wonderful artistry from the soloists, with stand-out characterisation from Adrian Eröd as Shylock.

Augsburger Allgemeine

The premiere at the Bregenz Festival of this intense and challenging piece of musical theater left a lasting impression. The British director Keith Warner has woven the multi-layered elements together in his complex staging. His production makes both the Shakespeare story and Tchaikovsky's music gripping.

Tchaikowsky and his librettist, John O'Brien, interpret the material successfully; serious, sometimes amusing, dance and pantomime. The amazing sets and acting make tough food easier to digest.

Stuttgarter Nachrichten

The Director Keith Warner and set designer Ashley Martin-Davis are intent on promoting an understanding of this work, especially in the claustrophobic confines of the courtroom scene in the third act. The Wiener Symphoniker (under the direction of Erik Nielsen) gives a dedicated performance [...] Impressive. The singing is highly respectable, with a stand out performance from Adrian Eröd as Shylock. As is so often the case with world premieres, it would be wonderful to experience this opera again soon!

Stuttgarter Zeitung

In this large three-hour work, the modern and rugged sharp sounds lie alongside delicate song structures and musical quotations; the sweet and light of the upper class lives alongside the gloom of the world of the Jews. This operatic production of The Merchant of Venice is closer to and more exciting than performances (of the play) given in many theatres.

Keith Warner gives the work a very British staging with consistently good narrative alongside the aesthetic power of the set designs of Ashley Martin Davis [...] Erik Nielsen phenomenally conducts the Wiener Symphoniker through the cosmos of this score. [...] Great, moving musical theatre.

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

Shakespeare's juxtaposition of drama, farce and comedy has caused more famous composers insurmountable problems. Then follows the third act, with the infamous trial scene [...]. And suddenly everything is different.

It is the fate of the Jews to give the Christians mercy? Tchaikowsky sets this trial with a hardness and precision that made the farce suddenly a harrowing tragedy.

Frankfurter Rundschau

Keith Warner brought the action alive on the stage, effectively supported by the uncomplicated sets of Ashley Martin-Davis. [...]

Erik Nielsen proved to be an attentive and sensitive director of the Wiener Symphoniker, showing what a specialist he is with unfamiliar sound worlds.

Südwestpresse, Ulm

It is not just about the opera on the Seebühne. After several other rediscoveries (including works by Szymanowski and Weinberg), the Bregenz Festival has scored a coup with the posthumous premiere of Tchaikowsky's The Merchant of Venice (1982)... a strong director and biting beautiful sounds.

[...] Warner works with ambiguous images and subtle humor. Erik Nielsen and the Wiener Symphoniker convey Tchaikowsky's strong musical language effectively.

Südkurier, Konstanz

[...] A stunning work, when you consider that it's Tchaikowsky's only opera [...] The history of music doesn't need to be rewritten, but nevertheless this remains a remarkable rediscovery... especially the dramatic courtroom scene. With Keith Warner's direction, it is the thrilling climax of the opera. The increasing fury of the ever-marginalised Shylock (the marvellous Adrian Eröd) is portrayed in music that becomes more and more tense and really gets under your skin!

[...] The Wiener Symphoniker under the baton of the young American Erik Nielsen was clearly at home with the score. Tchaikowsky would have been happy. The audience definitely was. A great reception!

Badische Zeitung, Freiburg

[...] Tchaikovsky's *The Merchant of Venice*, which had not yet been performed, is not an easy work. David Pountney cannot be praised highly enough for bringing this work to the Festspielhaus after over 30 years from when it was written.

[...] Adrian Eröd lives, sings and plays his Shylock incomparably, with much subtlety and melancholy in his lyrical baritone. Erik Nielsen and Wiener Symphoniker ensure that their work in this world premiere is just right, with great precision and interpretation.

Kurier, Vienna

Important, correct and very, very clever.

Artistic director David Pountney cannot be thanked enough for his 'excavation' of musical rarities. [...] The music is at once tonal, then a little atonal, musical clusters (so-called "tone clusters"), lyrical ensembles, some jazzy inserts, quotes from Benjamin Britten and sometimes Richard Wagner, but it is really good. [...] Above all, the music reaches its dramatic climax in the trial scene, when the Jew Shylock wants to cut his pound of flesh from the merchant Antonio; an immense dramatic moment.

It was an absolute joy, however, to hear the perfectly rehearsed Wiener Symphoniker under the direction of the young conductor Erik Nielsen, who made sure all the parts of this large work were heard in their place. [...] The same applies to some of the singers; as Shylock, the baritone Adrian Eröd is an absolute star. How Eröd's portrays both the perpetrator and victim is simply sensational. It gets under your skin; a rightly acclaimed performance. [...] And of the director? Keith Warner and set designer Ashley Martin-Davis create a production on multiple levels without it becoming a vanity project. [...]

Final word: Mostly very good. Eröd is terrific.

Die Presse, Vienna

The Merchant of Venice by André Tchaikovsky (1935-1982) receives its posthumous premiere: Adrian Eröd as Shylock in the expressive centre. [...] This long-forgotten setting of Shakespeare's work (libretto by John O'Brien) may be the compositional centrepiece of Tchaikovsky's life, but it receives premiere honours with this staging at Bregenz Festival.

Schwäbische Zeitung, Leutkirch

Though the romantics may have cultured melancholy feelings without cause, Keith Warner places Antonio on the psychiatrist's couch to get to the root of his depression, with the opening image of the opera being the same as the closing, which proves, in more ways than one, an ingenious artistic device. [...] Musically high levels were guaranteed with Erik Nielsen directing the Wiener Symphoniker, the Prague Philharmonic Choir, and not least the fabulous soloists.

Münchener Merkur

One could grasp this piece thanks to great singer-actors [...] Tchaikovsky demands a lot from the orchestra and Wiener Symphoniker has made this tricky score its own, thriving under the striking and sovereign lead of Erik Nielsen.

Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung

The courting of the rich heiress Portia (a confident and secure Magdalena Anna Hofmann) gives Tchaikovsky much (musical) pleasure and enjoyment. [...] Director Keith Warner gives the audience, via video projection from above, unexpected insights into the love maze.

Online ORF, Vienna

The separation of the different worlds is made clearly evident in the set design (Ashley Martin-Davis). Director Warner is clear and clean in his concept.

[...] Tchaikovsky's composition proves multi-faceted and demanding; not an easy task for the musicians or conductor and especially difficult for the singers. Nevertheless, the Wiener Symphoniker under the direction of Erik Nielsen as well as the singers, led by Adrian Eröd (Shylock) and Portia (Magdalena Hofmann) do justice to this score.

[...] In the Bregenz premiere, the work was well received by the audience; typical of a modern opera, but there was also a high degree of polarisation. There is no doubt due to Director Warner whose clever staging ensured the work received sympathetic applause. This was more than deserved.

Der neue Merkur, Vienna

Keith Warner created a clear direction for all involved and the sets and costumes of Ashley Martin-Davis are both practical and tasteful. Erik Nielsen oversaw this world premiere.

[...] The cast of singers could not be better. Above all, Adrian Eröd as Shylock. This role is tailor-made, as if the composer wrote for him. As Antonio, the countertenor Christopher Ainslie was perfect in the role. His friend Bassanio

was sung beautifully and lyrically by the tenor Charles Workman. His beloved Portia, Magdalena Anna Hofmann, delivered her role with fresh lyric soprano. Her companion Nerissa was Verena Gunz, who possesses a bright and very appealing mezzo soprano voice. Jessica, Shylock's daughter was performed by the charming and beautiful voice of Kathryn Lewek, with Jason Bridges whose pleasing tenor filled the role of her lover, Lorenzo.

Der Standard, Vienna

I am most enthusiastic about both the music and the direction. [...] This sophisticated score, peppered with many orchestral solos is a challenge for the Wiener Symphoniker, but under the careful and precise direction of Erik Nielsen, it handles the score excellently.

Tiroler Tageszeitung, Innsbruck

The world premiere of André Tchaikowsky's opera The Merchant of Venice for the Bregenz Festival is both a success and a great discovery. [...] Tchaikowsky's opera has been brought out of the darkness and into the light [...] Conductor Erik Nielsen and the Wiener Symphoniker more than rise to the challenge of this enormously demanding score. Keith Warner's staging, Ashley Martin-Davis's sets and costumes, Davy Cunningham's lighting design and Michael Barry's impressive movement direction all help in bringing out the intense relationships of the characters.

Salzburger Nachrichten

Warner's concise concept is all about the coming together of elements and the management of people. [...] The beginning chugs along in a mechanically and conversational manner but whenever the concept of love comes into play the, the music is lyrical, soft and light, and when the SS thugs and Inquisition acts, everything is loud and brash. The musical scenes are separated by musical interludes and the strongest music comes in the courtroom scene and in Shylock's monologue.

Der Tagesspiegel, Berlin

This production is elegant (set and costumes: Ashley Martin-Davis) and most convincing. [...]

Keith Warner's brilliant management of people, from the way he sets grotesquely humorous situations in this dark comedy alongside sentimental episodes through to creating thrilling tension, makes the three-hour evening bearable.

Wiener Zeitung

The focus of the action is really all about the Jew of Venice, and as such, Adrian Eröd is terrific: from the silent humiliation and acquiescence to the rigorous and revengeful stubbornness when he claims his famous pound of flesh, Eröd sounds so natural in his delivery of the text and his portrayal garnered a great response from the audience. There was a good reception for the Bassanio of Charles Workman and for the sweet (though small) countertenor of Christopher Ainslie (Antonio).

Vorarlberg Nachrichten, Schwarzach

The Merchant of Venice is a clever, entertaining and exciting work musical theater, which suggests a very precise analysis of the votes. We understand every word. And you understand, thanks to director Keith Warner each scene. [...] Adrian Eröd (Shylock) carries the work with very precise delivery, Christopher Ainslie brings the appropriate colour to the role of Antonio and the tone of David Stout's Gratiano is an excellent foil to the countertenor. Magdalena Anna Hofmann mastered the extremely difficult role of Portia in a vocally playful manner and Verena Gunz impresses as Nerissa. The soprano, Kathryn Lewek (Jessica), is very well cast, as is Charles Workman (Bassiano).

Deutsche Presse Agentur, Konstanz

In the Bregenz Festspielhaus, the work of Tchaikowsky turned out to be a game of time, associations and styles, which is emotional supported of Keith Warner's staging and the sets and costumes of Ashley Martin-Davis. [...] The score is played by the Wiener Symphoniker under the direction of Erik Nielsen and they remain true to the style of the opera, which sometimes seems to have folkloric elements, as displayed in the flute solos.

Austria Presse Agentur, Bregenz

[...] The Merchant of Venice is written in a very personal style; complex style, but a lot of space around the music. This three-hour work was sung in English and both the conducting of the American Erik Nielsen and the playing of the Wiener Symphoniker provided terrific music-making. The British director Keith Warner and his compatriot, Ashley Martin-Davis are equally successful. The work of someone who was basically a concert pianist and chamber musician, Tchaikowsky's opera proves to be both colourful and diverse, whilst at the

same time some dramatic deficits are evident.

The music challenges both the singers and the orchestra at the highest level. The famous court scene, where Shylock calls for a pound of flesh from the body of Antonio, is most compelling. The cast of singers included the celebrated Wiener Staatsoper baritone Adrian Eröd plays the role of Shylock, soprano Magdalena Anna Hofmann was a refined Portia, soprano Kathryn Lewek as Shylock's daughter Jessica, countertenor Christopher Ainslie as Antonio and tenor Charles Workman in the role of his friend Bassanio.

Oberösterreichische Nachrichten, Linz

Disregarding Tchaikowsky's concept the Venice, Keith Warner's concept of this work is set in the 1920's world created by Ashley Martin-Davies (sets and costumes). [...] Musically, the work is in the safe hands of Erik Nielsen and the Wiener Symphoniker, whose meticulous work was an ideal foundation for the overall superb cast of singers, which was led by Adrian Eröd as the fulminant Shylock. He is utterly convincing both vocally and in his portrayal of this complex role. The great Magdalena Anna Hofmann was a versatile Portia and Verena Gunz proved a shrewd Nerissa. Christopher Ainslie portrayed the fragile figure of Antonio very well, while the unshakable permeability of Bassano was in the hands of Charles Workman, an ideal performer who was vocally impressive.

Neue Vorarlberg Tageszeitung, Schwarzach

[...] The orchestral score is extremely expressive, varied and colored remotely comparable with Benjamin Britten

In general, Keith Warner is the finest choice as director.

[...] The incredibly complex score was performed by the Wiener Symphoniker under American conductor Erik Nielsen with admirable commitment.

Photo: Courtroom Scene, Act Three (Bregenzer Festspiele/Karl Forster)

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