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'Die Soldaten' in London

Ian Pace

Tempo, New Series, No. 200 (April 1997), pp. 41-42.

The first British production of Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Die Soldaten*, presented by English National Opera in November and December 1996, was an event of colossal proportions. This work is a titanic affair, which is as immediate, relevant and modern today as when it was first completed.

The opera gained a huge amount of attention in the national press, yet few commentators remarked on the sheer brute force of Zimmermann's music itself, which sometimes approaches a Xenakis-like physicality. From the opening *Preludio*, the awesome aural spectacle has few parallels. The imagination of the orchestral writing, whilst perhaps not quite reaching the levels of intricacy and range of harmonic colour which Zimmermann later achieved in *Photopsis*, is nonetheless remarkable, even after all the music that others have written in the intervening 30 years.

Jakob Lenz's terrible story of the downfall of a young girl who seeks both her independence and social mobility is transformed by Zimmermann into an allegory of the devastated modern world, in which militarism is ever prevalent and there remains the unspoken threat of the atom bomb (one interpretation of the deafening electronic sounds at the end). There is little room for tenderness or intimacy; rather one can only gaze with horrified pity at the appalling nature of what is presented. It is a world without hope, where those who attempt to improve their situation will surely be thwarted in their efforts; a world gradually engulfed under marching feet.

Zimmermann's use of pre-existing forms (toccatas, chaconnes, ricerari, rondos) or expressive conventions (capriccios, nocturnes, romances) ensures that coherence is maintained over the work's substantial span. The noticeable stylistic allusions or quotations are actually relatively few in number, considering how often they are commented upon. Their impact consequently becomes all the greater, as in the wild passage of jazz in the orgiastic first scene of Act 2, which almost seems to burst out of the shattering intensity that precedes it. It acts as a moment of relief after the claustrophobia of Act 1, which mirrors the increasingly confused mental state of Marie. When the jazz returns at the end of the work, as drunken soldiers pursue an Andalusian dancer, it has an altogether more ominous quality.

The vocal characterizations are no less acute; what particularly remains in the mind is the contrast between the fanciful, florid writing of Marie, with wide arching contours, and the more earthy tones of Charlotte. So many moments in the work are worthy of comment, but one which I am particularly struck by is the fantastic tapestry of subdivided strings in the fourth scene of Act 3 (a nocturne): the shimmerings are both electrifying and translucent. The final scene of Act 2 presents three concurrent scenes: the capricious flirtations of Marie and Desportes, wild and free, the sombre prophecies of doom of Wesener's mother, and the naggings of Stolzius's mother towards her son. Each have their own musical characteristics, and the net result is quite hypnotizing, as each presence is emphasized by virtue of its distinction from the others.

The production itself, however, left much to be desired. As was to be expected of a David Freeman production, the most sensationist aspects were played up to the full. Zimmermann specified the use of simultaneous films for the nightmarish first scene of Act 4, showing events leading up to both Marie's rape, then the rape itself, together with other scenes, so that 'the whole scene depicts Marie's rape as an allegory of the rape of all those involved in the action: a brutal physical, psychological and spiritual rape'. In this production, film was used throughout the opera, featuring such hackneyed symbolism as a child playing with a toy gun or animals attacking each other. The result blunted the impact of the rape scene itself, by which stage in the opera it was hard to deliver any more theatrical surprises. Unscripted scenes of soldiers staking out territory, or lying in wait, also seemed overacted (though this might be intentional) and added little to the work.

However, the singers were uniformly excellent, in particular Lisa Saffer, who has also played Marie in productions by New York City Opera and in the Opera de la Bastille. She delivered Zimmermann's fearsome vocal writing with an accuracy and confidence that was nothing short of incredible. Her acting was no less noteworthy, progressing seamlessly from youthful energy and naive wistfulness at the opening to a broken, tragic figure at the end. The orchestral playing lacked something in bite or even large scale differentiation.

We have had to wait 31 years to experience a British production of this work. Nono's *Intolleranza*, completed five years before *Die Soldaten*, has still not had a production - let alone *Prometeo*, or music-theatrical works of Bussotti, Sciarrino, Globokar, Hespos, Kagel, Schnebel and many others, while various British trivialities (with the notable exception of Birtwistle) seem to have no trouble making it onto the big opera stages (and thus eat up the limited funding available). *Lachenmann's Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelholzern* is currently being premiered in Hamburg; by my reckoning, when this finally arrives in London, I should be eligible for a senior citizen's concession.