

Freedom, passion, sensuality

Ingo Metzmacher



"Schreker's work is more concerned with longing than nostalgia." Ingo Metzmacher

The conductor Ingo Metzmacher is regarded as a renowned authority on operas by Franz Schreker. *Die Gezeichneten* in Amsterdam and *Der ferne Klang* in Zurich were successful and highly respected productions. Metzmacher believes that the renewed interest in Schreker's operas persists partially because his sound is vibrant and his spatial concept was far ahead of its time.

Mr. Metzmacher, when did you first discover Schreker?

Metzmacher: During my first position as kapellmeister in Gelsenkirchen, I was asked whether I would like to assist Christoph von Dohnányi in the production of *Der ferne Klang* by Schreker. In those days, as far as I can remember, I had never heard any of Schreker's music, although I was familiar with his name. But when Dohnányi walked out two weeks before the première in Hamburg owing to disagreements with the director, I stepped in, and so the work is extremely important to me; it was really the beginning of my career.

You performed the opera almost 20 years later in Zurich.

Metzmacher: Sometimes when you return to a piece like that, you say to yourself: “You were so euphoric back then and that feeling cannot be recreated.” However, *Der ferne Klang* actually interested me even more the second time around than when I first conducted it. Schreker’s operas have an almost multimedia approach. In the second act of *Der ferne Klang*, you experience the incredible feeling that you are in the middle of a film. There are four or five different sources of sound on stage, positioned all over the place, at the top, in the orchestra pit, at the back – you can put them wherever you choose. The listeners should feel as though they are in the midst of the action. Somebody told me later that Schreker’s father was one of the very first photographers. This means that Schreker had always come into contact with visual concepts; for example, zoom, wide angle, various perspectives and wandering camera. And the longer I think about Schreker, the more I believe that this is the essential element of his modernity: as an opera composer he widened the horizon to such an extent that there is no longer the situation in which everything comes from the front; it comes from different sides – listeners are drawn into the performance, as if they are in a cinema.

Schreker’s reception is unfortunately typical of many composers of his day. On the one hand, his music was conceived from a modern perspective, but he was the most frequently performed opera composer of his generation. So he was caught between two stools.

Metzmacher: Schreker represents a development that was cut short after the war. I would even say that this kind of music went directly to Hollywood – which in the case of Korngold is clearly recognisable. However, it also has to do with the fact that this kind of opera, together with the relevant music, increasingly moved in the direction of film. But of course, film was more suited to this territory than opera. Many of the functions that had been the responsibility of opera for many centuries were taken over by film: dealing with current issues, listening and seeing concurrently, the all-embracing effect on observer and listener.

Schreker was undoubtedly one of the last composers of this generation. A new aesthetic developed after the war. His personal fate as a “degenerate” artist in Berlin, who was driven out of office in 1933, attempted to emigrate and then died in 1934, is an additional factor. Like many others, he was simply forgotten – passed over. The Nazis did a good job on him.

“Schreker represents a development that was lost after the war.”

Schreker was very frequently defined via his sound – what is so special about his sound?

Metzmacher: Schreker composes distant, siren-like sounds which can be heard in almost every one of his works. They are sounds that are still new and unknown. *Der ferne Klang* is so special because we are confronted with an opera about music. Somebody is looking for a “new sound”, although I think that this sound is symbolic of many things. It can be interpreted in various ways: it was once said that “der Ferne” – the distance – can be read in the genitive; in other words, it is the sound of the distance, and not the sound that is distant. And so, a sound that is far away, hardly audible and very quiet – I think that always really fascinated him.

Even though Schreker’s music is of an entirely tonal conception, the base note no longer provides as much stability as before. You could compare Schreker with Richard Strauss, for example with his *Elektra*, which is wildly atonal in some places. But during the opera, the bass always remains rock solid and provides stability. It is different in Schreker’s harmonic language: the bass provides little stability. Furthermore, Schreker’s work is not necessarily bitonal, but he does place two functional chords on top of each other within one key. He therefore creates a harmonic situation in which it is extremely difficult to recognise what exactly is intended. Everything is in limbo – there are signs of disintegration. Although Schreker does not go quite as far as other composers, he heads in a similar direction.

Schreker is comparable to Gustav Mahler in that he also used “lower” and “higher” music in one work. Although there is a certain amount of nostalgia which constantly accompanies Mahler and plays no part in Schreker’s music.

Metzmacher: With Schreker, the focus is on longing and not nostalgia. In *Der ferne Klang* we also encounter an elegant Venetian brothel. In *Die Gezeichneten* it is the “isle of passion” off the coast of Genoa. Schreker

describes this place of longing, a place that has nothing dirty about it, but is fascinating because things are permitted there that are usually not permitted. It is all about freedom, passion, sensuality, but not in connection with anything disreputable. Schreker describes places of longing that are visited by people because they wish to experience pleasure, in the best sense.

In the second act of *Christophorus*, one of his last compositions, his last compositions, there is a similar scene. Here, the different sources of sound are not only distributed around the room, but the music adopts several layers – not only two, but up to five. If it were not performed in a place such as an opera house that is so static – I am referring to the stalls and fixed seating – then from a musical perspective, in the second act of *Der ferne Klang* the listeners should be at the centre, with the music played around them. That is the actual idea behind Schreker's music. It is the very modern idea of spatial music, similar to today's Dolby Surround.

Could it be said that Schreker approached the highest form of radicalism in his language, in the limits which he set himself?

Metzmacher: I'm not sure whether Schreker set himself limits.

For instance, the limit of tonality.

Metzmacher: That is true; he didn't really go beyond that. It would have been interesting to see which path he would have pursued. But perhaps you are right, perhaps he entirely consciously only went as far as a certain limit, and no further. But which composer ever went beyond his limits? There are only very few.

Could it be said that Schreker paved the way for works such as Wozzeck and Lulu, purely thematically, by previously performing works on stage such as Die Gezeichneten, those who are branded by life?

Metzmacher: That is certainly one way of looking at it. I believe that there is greater similarity between Schreker and Lulu than between Schreker and Wozzeck. It is definitely true that Schreker was one of the first to put completely ordinary people in everyday life on stage.

“The obscurity, this composition of twilight, must be

portrayed as clearly as possible.”

And also deformed people ☐

Metzmacher: Yes, them as well. Although Zemlinsky did the same thing in *Der Zwerg*.

What are the pitfalls, hurdles and dangers when you conduct Schreker’s music?

Metzmacher: Well, you must definitely keep a clear head – although that isn’t a danger, it is an absolute necessity. I believe there is music that is disappointing if it is only played clearly.

It is different with Schreker. Apart from the fact that the complex layers must be held together, precision is a precondition of performing his music. The composition already has its own inherent freedom; it has been included by Schreker in the compositional process, in the same way as the rubato. And if you don’t achieve precision, then the music could almost seem arbitrary.

The vagueness, this indistinguishable quality of the composition, must be communicated as clearly as possible. This can create a floating sensation that is very important both for the harmony and the rhythm of the music. The sounds must be balanced. For example, in the morning after the *Nachtstück* in *Der ferne Klang*, when the birds begin to sing – he went even further than Messiaen there. The orchestral sounds are incredible.

Something that greatly fascinated Alban Berg ☐

Metzmacher: ☐ who – unsurprisingly – prepared the piano reduction of *Der ferne Klang*. It is, however, not always possible to use words and explanations to define things that we find important in music. Many qualities simply lie much deeper. And that in turn would explain why this kind of music, with its unconscious nature, was treated with the utmost care after the war, as it was clearly suspicious. The composers did not want anything to escape them; they wanted to know exactly what they were writing. And that undoubtedly

provoked the desire for a series of numbers which could be referred to. Everything had a proper order – and Schreker's music is naturally completely incompatible with that concept.

Interview: Wolfgang Schaefler



VIDEO

See the video version of the interview at www.universaledition.com/metzmacher-interview